

E 17 88

Entered



Sri Ramakrishna

THE DISCIPLES
OF
SRI RAMAKRISHNA



ADVAITA ASHRAMA
MAYAVATI, ALMORA, HIMALAYAS

Published by
SWAMI PAVITRANANDA
ADVAITA ASHRAMA
Mayavati, Almora,
Himalayas

All rights reserved

Printed in India
by K. C. Banerjee,
at the Modern Art Press,
1/2, Durga Pituri Lane,
Calcutta.

PREFACE

The name of Swami Vivekananda, the chief disciple of the Saint of Dakshineswar and one through whom his message spread to the world, is widely known. But the general public knows little about other disciples of the great Master, though their sphere of influence was by no means small. In the present volume an attempt has been made to give short lives of all the monastic (excepting Swami Vivekananda) and some representative lay men and women disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. *The Disciples of Sri Ramakrishna* as a book is incomplete without the life of Swami Vivekananda. But that has been purposely omitted, since many volumes have been written on him and can be had separately.

These "Lives" are from the pen of different writers. This plan has got the advantage that different angles of vision are represented in one volume and the best picture of each life is available. Some of the articles were published in the *Prabuddha Bharata*; in a few cases they have been enlarged or adapted.

Particular attention has been given to the verification of each fact, and if some of the incidents are beyond the understanding of extremely rationalistic minds, we can only say that they are nevertheless true and that reason cannot explain everything in heaven and earth. But, on the whole, great stress has been laid on the human aspect of each life.

The lives of Swami Brahmananda and Swami

Saradananda are presented in greater detail, since the one was the first President and the other the first Secretary of the Ramakrishna Mission, and both of them working till their last days contributed largely to the building up of the organisation. They are also given precedence in the book, so that the reader can have, in the very beginning, an idea of the origin and development of the Mission. As regards the other disciples we put them according to the chronology of their passing away.

The lives of several disciples being closely interlinked, reference has, of necessity, been made in the book to names about whom details come afterwards. But a glance at the contents will obviate any difficulty that may be experienced owing to this.

As all the lives centred round one single Personality and as many of them had the same or a similar background, there have been some unavoidable repetitions.

In preparing the manuscripts we have consulted almost all the reliable English and Bengali books on the subject, which it is not possible to acknowledge separately.

We shall deem our labour amply rewarded if these lives inspire anyone with noble ideals and high aspirations and provide solace and strength to him in his weary journey through the world.

PUBLISHER

ADVAITA ASHRAMA
MAYAVATI, HIMALAYAS
March 21, 1943

CONTENTS

		PAGE
	Preface	iii
	Introduction	ix

MONASTIC DISCIPLES

I	Swami Brahmananda	3
II	Swami Saradananda ...	47
III	Swami Yogananda ...	107
IV	Swami Niranjanananda	126
V	Swami Advaitananda	134
VI	Swami Ramakrishnananda	140
VII	Swami Trigunatitananda	172
VIII	Swami Premananda	195
IX	Swami Adbhutananda	225
X	Swami Turiyananda	250
XI	Swami Subodhananda	276
XII	Swami Shivananda	290
XIII	Swami Akhandananda	313
XIV	Swami Vijnanananda	327
XV	Swami Abhedananda	347

LAY DISCIPLES

I	Nag Mahashay ...	365
II	Girish Chandra Ghosh	390
III	Mahendra Nath Gupta	417

WOMEN DISCIPLES

I	<i>Gopal's Mother</i>	...	...	441
II	<i>Jogin Ma</i>	...	...	456
III	<i>Golap Ma</i>	...	...	464
IV	<i>Gauri Ma</i>	...	...	468
	<i>Appendix</i>	...	...	475
	<i>Glossary</i>	...	...	477

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1.	Sri Ramakrishna	...	<i>Frontispiece</i>
			FACING PAGE
2.	Swami Brahmananda	...	3
3.	Swami Saradananda	...	47
4.	Swami Yogananda and Swami Niranjanananda	...	107
5.	Swami Ramakrishnananda and Swami Trigunatitananda	...	140
6.	Swami Premananda	...	195
7.	Swami Advaitananda and Swami Adbhutananda	...	225
8.	Swami Turiyananda	...	250
9.	Swami Shivananda	...	290
10.	Swami Subodhananda and Swami Vijnanananda	...	327
11.	Swami Akhandananda and Swami Abhedananda	...	347
12.	Nag Mahashay and Girish Chandra Ghosh	...	365
13.	Mahendra Nath Gupta	...	417
14.	Gopal's Mother	...	441
15.	Jogin Ma and Golap Ma	...	456
16.	Gauri Ma	...	468

INTRODUCTION

SRI RAMAKRISHNA AND HIS DISCIPLES

The real history of India is the history of the lives of some of her spiritual personalities. It is they who have moulded her life and determined her destiny. On Indian life as a whole, the influence of a Sri Krishna, a Buddha, a Shankaracharya, or a Chaitanya is much more pronounced than the influence of any king or emperor. And it is an interesting phenomenon that at every critical time in the cultural and spiritual life of India there has been born a saint who has saved the country from a fatal catastrophe and shown the nation the right direction.

In the beginning of the last century, India was passing through a great crisis. With the impact of Western civilisation and the spread of English education, the Indians began to lose interest and faith in their own culture. Amongst the English-educated people of India there were very few who had a genuine appreciation of Indian culture, though they were born on Indian soil and had the heritage of India's past.

At that time was born in an out-of-the-way village of Bengal one whose life was an unconscious but spontaneous and powerful protest against disregard for the value of Indian religion and culture. It is an irony of fate that in Calcutta, the metropolis of India and the citadel of English education, while the Christian missionaries were criticising and abusing Hinduism as idolatrous and a large number of English-educated Indians

even joined or sided directly or indirectly with this proselytising body, Sri Ramakrishna was revitalising the truths of Hinduism by his intense Sadhana and wonderful realisations at the temple-garden of Dakshineswar, a few miles from the city. And he soon became the powerful instrument of turning the mind of India again to the strength and beauty in Indian religion and culture.

Sri Ramakrishna was born in the year 1836 at Kamarpukur, an obscure village in the district of Hooghly. His parents were pious, orthodox Brahmins, and his family surroundings were such that no ray of Western civilisation ever had any access there. Sri Ramakrishna was a child of nature, and as a matter of fact, throughout his life he remained such, untouched by the least worldliness. The sight of anything beautiful in nature, or the stirring up of emotion by a religious sentiment, would throw his mind into a super-conscious state, and in that condition he would remain for a long time oblivious of his surroundings. While his guardians pressed him to receive education at the village school, the boy found great delight in remaining in the open fields, acting religious dramas with his companions or singing devotional music with them. Finding that his life was going to be spoilt in the village atmosphere, his eldest brother took him to Calcutta, where better facilities might be had for education. But the boy was obstinate. He would not undergo the drudgery of an education which was simply a "means of earning bread," but he was athirst for that knowledge which would solve the

problem of life and death. His guardian gave up the case as hopeless and let him have his own way.

Sri Ramakrishna was, however, persuaded to take up the priestly duties in the temple of Kali at Dakshineswar, which was opened in 1855. Here he found congenial work in an atmosphere which was to his liking. But Sri Ramakrishna's was not a mind to be satisfied with the routine duties and the mechanical performance of rituals in the temple. As he was offering worship from day to day before the image of Kali, the thought that oppressed him was, "Is She a living presence, or simply a stone image before which I am bowing down every day?" He was passing through a great mental agony, and this simple childlike thought became almost devouring to him. Day and night he would give vent to his feelings in tears till at last he experienced a living presence in the image far beyond the possibility of any doubt. After that the Goddess Kali—or the Divine Mother as he would call Her—was to him a greater reality than any material object. He would talk to Her, he would pray to Her, he would hear Her voice—nay, he would feel the very breath of Her nostrils. It is not for us to prove how that was possible, but it was a fact for him.

Sri Ramakrishna was not satisfied with a single form of Sadhana, he practised almost all the forms of spiritual practice advocated by Hinduism in the different periods of its history. So it is said that he represented in one life the whole religious history of India's past. It was a unique phenomenon. Whereas an aspirant

usually undertakes one mode of spiritual practice and considers himself blessed if he can succeed in that, here was one who performed countless forms of Sadhana and in every one attained success in an incredibly short time. Not being content even with that, he practised Islam and realised also the truth of Christianity. Thus he realised from his own personal experience that all religions are true and that fundamentally there is no difference between them. This is a teaching on which he laid great emphasis.

During the last few years of his life he lived more in the superconscious than in the conscious plane. He remained constantly in tune with the Infinite, and the slightest thing having the remotest association with any religious idea would throw his mind into ecstasy, in which he would be totally oblivious of his surroundings—nay, of his very bodily existence.

Such a powerful personality could not remain unknown. People began to flock to him for religious inspiration and for the solution of the deeper problems of life. Persons of diverse types and from different walks of life began to come to him. Kristodas Pal—the great national leader, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee—the great Bengali prose writer, Girish Chandra Ghosh—the great actor-dramatist and the father of the Bengali stage, Dr. Mahendra Lal Sarkar—the great physician, Sasadhar Tarakachudamani—the leader of the orthodox Hindu community and an erudite Sanskrit scholar, Keshab Chandra Sen—the great Brahmo leader, to name only a few, were amongst those prominent men of the day who met

him and drank in the words of wisdom that fell from his lips. There were innumerable devotees—men and women—whose lives he completely metamorphosed and turned into pure gold. But his chief concern was with a band of young men, whose lives he moulded with particular care for the fulfilment of his future mission. Chief among these was Narendra Nath Datta, afterwards known as Swami Vivekananda, who became the accredited leader of the whole group because of his extraordinary spiritual powers as well as of his great qualities of head and heart.

Strangely enough, Narendra Nath was just the antithesis of Sri Ramakrishna. He came of an aristocratic family of Calcutta. He was brought up in the modern school of thought, received the best type of English education and showed unusual intellectual ability. He had not only studied Western literature, art, science and philosophy, but had assimilated them. Even his professors were amazed at his powers of argument and extraordinary intellectual gifts. For a time Narendra Nath turned a sceptic if not an atheist, but he was longing for the solution of the mystery of the universe and of the problem of life and death. Fortune brought him in contact with Sri Ramakrishna, and that meeting became, as it were, the confluence of the Old and New India, and, should we say, foreshadowed the great part India was to play in future?

Narendra Nath was seized with spiritual longing, although his was an extremely rational mind characterised by a very combative spirit. He was fascinated by the personality of Sri Ramakrishna

—his guileless faith in the Divine Mother, the conviction with which he spoke of spiritual things and, last but not least, his uncommon love for him. But Narendra Nath's intellect would not submit to Sri Ramakrishna, though his heart was quickly conquered by the Master. So there ensued a long period of struggle and fight. Narendra Nath brought in smashing arguments to belittle or disprove what Sri Ramakrishna would say, but all his missiles would instantaneously prove ineffective in the face of the simple utterances of the Master. Narendra Nath was in a sorry predicament. He suffered from torment of mind and confusion of spirits. At last he totally surrendered himself to the feet of the Master. Afterwards Swami Vivekananda would say in great remorse, "It took me six years to learn that he was not only holy but holiness itself."

After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna in 1886, Narendra Nath became the leader of the group of his brother-disciples left in his charge by the Master. They formed a brotherhood and started a monastery at Baranagore, near Calcutta. Seized by a Sannyasin spirit of freedom, Narendra Nath wandered through the length and breadth of India, mixed with the high and the low, the rich and the poor, and had good opportunity to study the various problems of the country and to know her intimately.

Another stroke of fortune threw him across two oceans to America, where he found himself a welcome though uninvited representative of Hinduism in the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in the year 1893. The first words this

yellow-robed monk uttered in that august assembly had an electric effect, and by that one speech he made history. His exposition of Hinduism—its catholicity, its sublimity, its deep philosophy—made a deep impression upon the American minds, and people began to feel how ridiculous it was to send missionaries to India to “convert the heathens.”

After four years of preaching in America and Europe, the Swami sailed for India. When he returned home, he was given a right royal reception from Colombo to Almora; for in the services done by him India felt a national glory. Swami Vivekananda was the first Indian monk, after the Buddhist period, who carried the message of India abroad, and it was such a tremendous success! Though he was a Sannyasin *par excellence*, yet his message to India sounded like the words of a fiery nationalist, and his utterances did not a little to awaken amongst his countrymen the national consciousness and a sense of pride in the country's past and a hope for a better future. After coming back to India he started an organisation, the Ramakrishna Mission, for the regeneration of India, as also for the welfare of humanity at large. But hardly had the work been afoot when the great Swami passed away, in 1902, leaving his standard to be taken up by his brother-disciples.

The message of Sri Ramakrishna has now spread far and wide. The devotees and admirers of the great Prophet of modern India can be found all over the world. The Ramakrishna Mission is now making great strides in various

fields of activity. It has many centres in India and abroad, and the demand for more centres is increasingly great. But behind the success of the work are not only the strength of the unique message of the Master and the dynamic spirit of Swami Vivekananda, but also the spiritual attainments of the other disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Many of the brother-disciples of Swami Vivekananda were also extraordinary personalities; the outside world does not know sufficiently about them only because they were overshadowed by his supreme height. It seems that Sri Ramakrishna gathered round him disciples each of whom was to contribute to the fulfilment of his mission, and every one of them was a superb success in his own line.

When the Great Light had gone away, the lamps that had been kindled by it began to shed lustre in innumerable places. Indeed each disciple of the Master became a centre of wide influence and was instrumental in transforming hundreds of lives. Each one of them was, as the following pages will show, a gigantic spiritual personality—superb in character, unique in achievement and an asset to humanity. When one considers this, one wonders how so many almost superhuman characters could cluster together at one and the same time. Truly Sri Ramakrishna was a great jeweller. So he could collect so many jewels and leave them as a legacy to the world.

MONASTIC DISCIPLES



Swami Brahmananda

I

SWAMI BRAHMANANDA

THE VISION OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA

In the latter part of the last century a wonderful drama was enacted in the temple-garden of Dakshineswar. Sri Ramakrishna, who came to the place first as a temple priest, instead of mechanically performing the rituals connected with the worship, asked himself, with all the innocence of a child of nature, whether the Goddess whom he worshipped was a living Presence or simply a stone image. And wonder of wonders, the devotion of this young priest quickened the image to life, the Divine Mother vouchsafed him a vision and touched him with all the affection of a mother. As time went on, Sri Ramakrishna found in the image of Kali at Dakshineswar a living reality. He would see Her walk and play, he would converse with Her just in the way a child talks with its earthly mother. Nay, he could feel the very breath of Her nostrils or even the pulsation of Her heart. She was much more tangible to him than any material object in the world.

Afterwards through various forms of Sadhana Sri Ramakrishna realised God in different aspects, and his mind thenceforward constantly travelled back and forth from the plane of dualism to that

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

of the highest monism where the worshipper and the worshipped become one and the world becomes naught.

Such being the condition of his mind, any worldly thought was impossible for him. He was the embodiment of renunciation. Even if inadvertently his fingers touched any metallic currency, his whole body would recoil, representing as the coin did to his mind the human desire for sense pleasure. Though in the world, his mind was beyond the reach of the world. His mind was buried in visions, ecstasies and divine communion.

One day Sri Ramakrishna saw a vision which threw his whole body into a shiver. He saw that the Divine Mother pointed out to him a boy as being his son. How could he have a son? The very idea was death to him! Then the Divine Mother consoled Her disconsolate child and said that the boy was his spiritual son and not a son in the worldly sense. Sri Ramakrishna breathed a sigh of relief. Afterwards when the disciple who was later known as Swami Brahmananda came to him, Sri Ramakrishna at once recognised him to be the boy he had seen in his vision.

EARLY LIFE

The early name of Swami Brahmananda was Rakhal Chandra Ghosh. He came of a rich family in Basirhat in the district of Twenty-four Parganas. His father Ananda Mohan Ghosh was a zemindar. His mother was a pious lady

and a devotee of Sri Krishna. Perhaps it was she who gave her son the name Rakhal (meaning the boy-companion of Sri Krishna) when the latter was born in the year 1863. Unfortunately the mother died when Rakhal was only five years old, and his father married a second wife who brought up Rakhal.

Rakhal grew up a very healthy and fine-looking boy. There was something in his very appearance which endeared him to one and all. He was sent to the village school which was started by Ananda Mohan chiefly for the sake of his son. During those days the village schoolmasters were famous for using their rods. Rakhal would feel pained if any of his class-mates had to undergo corporal punishment. This attracted the notice of the teacher, who afterwards gave up the practice of caning altogether. As a student Rakhal was remarkable for his intelligence. But even as a boy he had varied interests in life. Physically he was much stronger than the average boy of his age. His companions found it hard to cope with him in wrestling or at play. He would take part in many village games and show unsurpassed skill in them. But play and games did not absorb the whole of his attention. Near by was the temple dedicated to the Goddess Kali. Most of the time in the day Rakhal spent in the precincts of the temple. Sometimes Rakhal would play at Mother-worship along with his companions. Sometimes he would himself form a beautiful clay image of the Mother and remain absorbed in worship. Even at an early age

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Rakhal had great devotion to gods and goddesses. During the time of Durga Puja in the family, Rakhal would be found seated still and calm as in deep meditation witnessing the ceremony, or at the hour of darkness, when the evening service was being performed, Rakhal would be seen standing before the Deity in great devotion.

Rakhal from his boyhood had instinctive love for devotional music. When begging friars sang songs in praise of the flute-player of Vrindavan, or when anyone sang songs about the Divine Mother, Rakhal would become lost to himself. Sometimes Rakhal would repair with his companions to a secluded spot in the midst of the open field close to the village, and they would sing devotional songs in chorus. In the course of singing, Rakhal would occasionally lose almost all outward consciousness, his mind soaring up to a higher region.

After he had finished the primary education, Rakhal was sent to Calcutta and admitted into an English High School. Here he came in contact with Narendra Nath, afterwards known as Swami Vivekananda, who was then leader of the boys of the locality. Narendra Nath was dynamic in spirit and a born leader. He easily cast his influence over others and carried them along the path he thought right. Rakhal was very meek, quiet and soft-natured. He easily came under the spell of Narendra Nath, and there grew a close friendship between the two which culminated in a common discipleship at Dakshineswar and became fruitful of far-reaching results.

Rakhal and Narendra Nath practised physical exercise in a common gymnasium along with their other companions. And it was Narendra Nath who took Rakhal to the Brahmo Samaj. Rakhal's inborn religious tendencies began to unfold themselves more definitely at this stage. He would be found brooding over the mysteries of life and death, and his mind longed for the realisation of the *Eternal Verity*. He was intelligent and sharp, but he now lost all interest in his school work. His guardians became alarmed at his indifference to studies. At first they tried to change his attitude through loving persuasion. When that failed, they became stern and strict. But even that failed. Rakhal was yearning for That which makes all book-learning insignificant and valueless. When all measures proved abortive, the father of Rakhal got him married, thinking that thereby his interest would turn towards worldly things. But such was the irony of fate that this marriage itself brought Rakhal into contact with the one who afterwards changed the whole course of his life.

Rakhal married the sister of one Manomohan Mitra of Konnagar, an important village up the Ganges on the right bank, a few miles from Dakshineswar. Both Manomohan and his mother were great devotees of Sri Ramakrishna. After the marriage of Rakhal, Manomohan one day took him to Dakshineswar to meet the Master. When Rakhal bowed before the Master, the latter at once recognised him to be the boy he had seen in that vision. A wave of joy passed

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

through the mind and the body of the Master, but he did not give vent to his feelings except by the fact that he treated Rakhal with utmost kindness. Rakhal was charmed with the wonderful love of the Master and thought that he had never received such affection from anybody before. Naturally, the thought of the Master haunted the mind of Rakhal even after he had returned home. As a result, some time afterwards, Rakhal one day went to Dakshineswar alone. The Master was in ecstasy at the sight of Rakhal, and the latter stood dumbfounded.

DAKSHINESWAR DAYS

Rakhal began to go to Dakshineswar as often as he could. He began also sometimes to stay there. Though a young man of eighteen or nineteen, in the presence of the Master he felt like a child of four or five, and he actually behaved that way. In the Master Rakhal found the deep affection of his long-lost mother and the tender care of his father, only in a degree infinitely more intense. The Master also treated him exactly as his child. He would feel concerned for him as for a helpless infant. Whereas other disciples attended to the comforts of the Master, the latter himself would often take care of Rakhal. And there was such a spontaneity and naturalness in this strange relationship between the two, that a bystander would rather enjoy it than feel astonished at it. Whereas other disciples would consider it a great favour and privilege if they were allowed to do the least

service for the Master, Rakhal would sometimes refuse point-blank to do work which he was called upon to do by the Master. Instead of being annoyed, Sri Ramakrishna was glad at such behaviour of Rakhal; for it indicated the intimate love which the boy had for him. But Rakhal would usually be eager to attend to all the comforts of the Master. He was more than a personal attendant to him. A son does not serve his father with so much loving devotion as Rakhal served the Master. Not only did he perform personal services for the Master, but he would carefully guard the body of the Master when the latter's mind was lost in Samadhi. At times, when the Master would walk about in his ecstatic moods, Rakhal would guide his footsteps by holding his body and giving loud directions about the things to be guarded against.

When Rakhal began to frequent Dakshineswar and sometimes even to stay there to the detriment of his studies, his father became annoyed and afterwards alarmed. He tried his best to persuade Rakhal to be mindful of his future worldly career, but it was impossible for Rakhal to think of his future in terms of material happiness. At one time Ananda Mohan kept Rakhal under surveillance, but Rakhal managed to escape and ran to Dakshineswar. When all measures failed Ananda Mohan gave up the case of Rakhal as hopeless. Rakhal now felt relieved that he could stay with the Master without any interference from home.

Rakhal received from the Master not only the

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

tender affection of a parent, but also the guidance of a spiritual Guru. It was the unsurpassed love of the Master which at first drew Rakhal to him, but the latter soon found that behind that human affection there was a spiritual power which could transform lives by a mere wish or thought. Along with the love he received from the Master, Rakhal began to undergo also a great spiritual transformation.

The Master was very keen in regard to the spiritual training of his beloved son. If need be, he did not hesitate to scold Rakhal for the least failing noticed in him. One day when Rakhal came before the Master, the latter asked him why there was a shadow of darkness over his face. Was it the result of any wrong he had committed? Rakhal gaped in wonder. He could not remember to have done anything wrong. When cross-examined by the Master, Rakhal recollected that he had told a fib in fun. Then the Master cautioned him not to tell a lie even in jokes.

One day the Master with Rakhal went on invitation to attend a religious festival. But the organisers of the festival were busy with rich and influential people and showed scant courtesy to the Master. This was certainly more than young Rakhal could bear. Like a petulant boy he asked the Master to leave the place at once. But the Master would not listen to his counsel, and put up with any amount of indignity. Afterwards he told Rakhal that if they had left the place in resentment that would have caused harm

to the devotees. Rakhal saw the depth of meaning even behind the trifling acts of the Master, and himself got a lesson in humility and self-effacement.

Sometimes in a spiritual mood Sri Ramakrishna would quite unexpectedly bestow the highest gifts on his chosen disciples. Once he did that with respect to Rakhal also. Rakhal was in meditation in front of the Kali temple when the Master arrived on the spot. Finding Rakhal seated in meditation, the Master accosted him and said, "This is your sacred Word and this is your Chosen Ideal." Rakhal looked up and was vouchsafed the vision of his Chosen Deity. Rakhal was beside himself with joy at this unexpected stroke of favour and realised what a tremendous spiritual power was hidden in one with whom he was privileged to move about so closely and freely. Rakhal was overwhelmed with feelings of gratitude to God at his rare good fortune.

As he continued his stay with the Master at Dakshineswar Rakhal's spiritual life began to progress rapidly. There were many occasions when Rakhal would be so much absorbed in meditation that he would lose all consciousness of the sense-world, and the Master had to come to his aid to bring his thought down to the plane of ordinary consciousness.

The Master was so much pleased with the spiritual progress Rakhal was making that he would sometimes publicly praise Rakhal. Rakhal would be constantly in communion with God.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

He would day and night repeat the Holy Name, and his moving lips would betray what was going on inside. The very sight of this would now and then throw the Master into ecstasy. Out of the fullness of joy at having such a worthy disciple Sri Ramakrishna began to teach Rakhal the intricacies of Yoga and various forms of spiritual practice. But Rakhal hated any publicity in these things. He would perform spiritual practices as secretly as possible. But his appearance, modes of thought and conduct, and, above all, the radiating sweetness of his nature would indicate the inner transformation he was undergoing.

Spiritual life is not, however, all smooth-sailing. There are ups and downs even there. However fortunate the aspirant, however favourable the momentum of his past life, however great the blessings of the Guru, he has to pass through a period of stress and struggle, toss about in the stream of hopes and fears and contend against the dark phantoms of doubts and difficulties. Rakhal also had to pass through these stages.

One day Rakhal sat for meditation in the music hall of the Kali temple, but however much he tried, his mind wandered about till he got exasperated. Rakhal was filled with remorse and self-disparagement. He had received the blessings of a saint like the Master and everything in the atmosphere was favourable to spiritual progress, and yet such was the condition of his mind ! Perhaps he was not fit for spiritual

life. Such stormy thoughts assailed him, and in sheer disgust and agony he left the seat of meditation. By a strange coincidence Sri Ramakrishna was just then passing that way. Looking at Rakhal he inquired why he got up from his seat after such a short time. Rakhal in all frankness narrated what was passing through his mind. The Master looked grave and pensive for a while and then asked Rakhal to open his mouth. While muttering some indistinct words, the Master wrote something on the tongue of Rakhal. It had the instantaneous effect of unloading the burden of Rakhal's mind. He felt relieved, and an inner current of joy flowed through his mind. The Master smiled and asked Rakhal to try to meditate again. There are similar other incidents as to how even a worthy disciple like Rakhal had to struggle against the vagaries of his mind, and afterwards the grace of the Master relieved him of his difficulties,

Rakhal was having a blissful time with the Master at Dakshineswar. But trouble came. He began to have repeated attacks of fever, which made the Master very anxious. At that time the great devotee Balaram Bose was about to go to Vrindavan. With him Rakhal was also sent for a change of climate. There also Rakhal fell ill. That made the Master all the more anxious, for he had known in a vision that Rakhal was a companion of Sri Krishna in a previous incarnation and he feared that Rakhal might give up his body if the recollection of the past came to his mind. Sri Ramakrishna prayed piteously to the

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Divine Mother for his spiritual son, and was not relieved till he got an assurance from Her.

The devotional nature of Rakhal got further impetus by his stay at Vrindavan, holy with the association of Sri Krishna. It was perhaps due to this that in later days on more than one occasion he went to this place for Tapasya. After three months Rakhal returned to Dakshineswar much improved in health, and the Master was glad beyond measure to receive him.

The number of devotees and young disciples who were attracted by the personality of the Master was steadily on the increase. Some of the young disciples were Rakhal's old friends and acquaintances; so he was happy to have a tie of common discipleship with them. But they were not to enjoy the holy company of the Master long. For Sri Ramakrishna fell ill of throat trouble which developed into cancer. Sri Ramakrishna was removed to Shyampukur, Calcutta, and then to Cossipore for facilities of better treatment. Under the leadership of Narendranath Rakhal and others threw themselves heart and soul into the work of nursing the Master. These were days of service to the Guru as well as of strenuous spiritual discipline. Rakhal and others would work hard during the day and undergo even harder spiritual practices at night. They knew no fatigue. Rakhal was by nature introspective, but now he grew more and more serious and indrawn. Naren was the leader, but Rakhal was by his side to help him. One day the Master told Narendranath in secret, "Rakhal has the

wisdom and capacity to administer ■ vast kingdom." Naren understood what it meant. And when the time came, he took advantage of this opinion of the Master about Rakhal. The young disciples held Rakhal in great esteem because he was so much loved and admired by the Master. One day Narendra Nath suggested to his brother-disciples, "Henceforward let us address Rakhal as 'Raja,' meaning king." Everyone gave a spontaneous assent to the proposal. When the news reached the ears of the Master he was glad and remarked, "Indeed it is an appropriate name for Rakhal."

One day a devotee expressed a desire to the Master to feed and distribute some cloths amongst Sannyasins. At this the Master remarked, "Where will you get better monks than these young boys?" The devotee did as suggested and placed some ochre cloths before the Master for distribution. Sri Ramakrishna distributed them amongst Rakhal and others. He now and then sent them out to beg their food, for that was a training in self-effacement and a preparation for their future monastic life.

The disciples were hoping against hope that the Master would recover. But he was gradually becoming worse and worse. One day Rakhal in agony asked the Master to pray to the Divine Mother for recovery. But it was impossible for the Master to pray for any particular thing against the will of God, much less for his health. He simply replied, "That rests with God."

Yes, God's will prevailed against all human

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

efforts. In spite of the best medical care and treatment, the Master began to sink and passed away on August 16, 1886. The disciples and devotees were plunged into profound grief. All of a sudden they felt as if the protecting roof overhead had been taken off, and they did not know what to do. The case of Rakhal was the more so; for he had lived under the special care of the Master who had guarded him constantly against every difficulty or hardship of life just as a mother-bird guards her young ones with her protecting wings. Though grown up Rakhal had been looked upon as an innocent child by the Master. Now Rakhal had nothing to console and comfort him excepting the memory of the love he had been privileged to receive from the Master.

AFTER THE PASSING OF THE MASTER

The Cossipore garden-house where the Master was put up in his last days became like a monastery. The atmosphere was surcharged with the spiritual fervour of the disciples as well as with the uplifting influence of the presence of the Master. After the passing away of the Master when many of the young disciples returned home, they could not fit in there. They were pining for one another's company as well as for the happy days of Dakshineswar. They wanted to live together in search of the Ideal the Master had put before them. At last a monastery was established at Baranagore to which began to come, one by one, the disciples of the Master,

SWAMI BRAHMANANDA

and they formed the Ramakrishna Brotherhood. After some time they took Sannyasa ceremonially and changed their family names. Thus Rakhai became Swami Brahmananda. But his brother-disciples preferred to address him as "Raja," as a mark of deep love and respect.

If the period of stay in the company of the Master was one of supreme bliss, the days at Baranagore were of hard Tapasya. The young disciples were ready to lay down their lives, as it were, in search of the great Unknown. They did not care about physical comforts, they did not care about food and drink; the one supreme thought of their lives was how to realise the Self- or rather how to make the realisations they had in the presence of the Master a permanent factor in their lives.

After some time even the life at Baranagore seemed to them too secure for their spiritual growth. They wanted to be lost in the wide unknown world with no help and guide excepting God. Some of them began to go to places of pilgrimage to practise Tapasya in seclusion. Swami Brahmananda, spurred by such a spirit of renunciation, went to Puri. He stayed there for some time begging his food here and there and passing his days in the thought of the Lord. The devotees and disciples of the Master could never bear the idea that Swami Brahmananda should suffer any hardship, for was he not the special care of the Master? So when Balaram Bose, who had a big estate in Orissa and a rich establishment at Puri, heard that Swami Brahma-

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

nanda was undergoing great austerities, he began to press the latter to stay with him in more comfort. Swami Brahmananda, finding that at Puri he could not follow his own way of life, returned to Baranagore. But he was seized with intense longing to make harder efforts to realise the goal of life. He expressed his desire to go to North India and to practise Tapasya somewhere there. The leader, Narendra Nath, reluctantly agreed to allow his beloved brother-disciple to embrace the wandering life. But he directed another brother-disciple, Swami Subodhananda, to accompany him, so that "Raja" should not have to suffer much inconvenience. Swami Brahmananda went to Benares *via* Deoghar and stayed there for some time. From Benares Swami Brahmananda went to Omkarnath on the bank of the Nerbuda. It is said that while practising Tapasya on the bank of that holy river, Swami Brahmananda was once for six days at a stretch in an ecstatic mood, almost oblivious of the outward world. After Omkarnath Swami Brahmananda with his brother-disciple and a devotee visited other places of pilgrimage like Panchavati, holy with the association of Ramachandra and Sita, Dwarka, where there is the famous temple of Sri Krishna, Porbandar, Girnar, Ajmere, etc., and afterwards returned to Vrindavan. For a soul like Swami Brahmananda, visiting these holy places did not simply mean the satisfaction of the idle curiosity of a sight-seer, but at every place he would identify himself with the deeper spirit of the

SWAMI BRAHMANANDA

environment. As a result he was constantly absorbed within himself, and though his lips were closed his face indicated the spiritual fire within. Many were the persons who were attracted to him merely by his placid countenance and indrawn look. They would feel it a privilege to be of some service to him, and pressed the Swami to receive it, but one whose mind was soaring high was altogether indifferent to any material comfort. It was difficult, if not impossible, to persuade the Swami to accept any gift. If extremely pressed, the Swami would agree to accept something, but that would be so little and of such a trifling nature that that would cause more astonishment than pleasure to the giver.

It was for the second time that the Swami came to Vrindavan. Here he passed the days in severe spiritual practices. He was burning with ■ desire to reach the ultimate goal of life. And in the attempt to realise this desire any price was not too great for him to pay. Throughout the day he would be practising one or another form of spiritual practice. Swami Subodhananda was there with him. But they hardly talked. Swami Subodhananda would fetch food for him; but sometimes he would eat that and sometimes he would remain without meals. Such austerities were not the outcome of deliberate effort, but he was so much occupied with the thought of the goal of life that the physical comforts, about which ordinary people are so particular, had no importance for him. The great saint Vijay Krishna Goswami, who had seen Rakhal at

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Dakshineswar and knew how beloved he had been to Sri Ramakrishna, was at this time staying at Vrindavan. When he saw the severe austerities Swami Brahmananda was undergoing, he asked him: "What necessity have you to perform so much Sadhana? Has not the Master given you all that is covetable in spiritual life?" To this the Swami simply smiled and replied, "What I got from him I want to make a permanent possession." The saint understood that it was idle to try to dissuade the Swami from his path.

After some time Swami Subodhananda left for a pilgrimage to Hardwar and Swami Brahmananda lived alone. This gave him greater freedom of life and an opportunity to practise harder Tapasya.

At Vrindavan he heard the news that the great devotee Balaram Bose had died. Balaram Bose had befriended him so much and he had been so greatly loved by the Master! The news of the death of Balaram Bose upset him so much that he left Vrindavan and went to the Himalayan region at Hardwar for greater solitude. He stayed at Kankhal near Hardwar for a period. Afterwards he would praise Kankhal very much as a suitable place for Tapasya. He would say that the atmosphere of Kankhal was very favourable for spiritual growth. At Kankhal Swami Vivekananda with some brother-disciples unexpectedly came to meet Swami Brahmananda. The joy of such a meeting can be better imagined than described. Swami Vivekananda feared

SWAMI BRAHMANANDA

perhaps that Swami Brahmananda would impair his health by hard Tapasya and living alone, so he compelled him to accompany him on his way to Meerut. Swami Vivekananda left his brother-disciples at Delhi in order to wander alone. After this, accompanied by a brother-disciple, Swami Turiyananda, Swami Brahmananda started on a pilgrimage to Jwalamukhi and from there he visited various other sacred places in the Punjab, Sindh, Bombay and Rajputana. At Bombay they unexpectedly again met Swami Vivekananda who was then preparing to sail for America to attend the Parliament of Religions at Chicago. From there Swami Brahmananda again returned to Vrindavan. Swami Turiyananda was also in his company. Both of them gave their time entirely to spiritual practices, Swami Turiyananda also taking care of Swami Brahmananda. They had a very enviable time at Vrindavan, both of them being absorbed day and night in communion with God. Afterwards they would very delightfully recount many happy incidents of their lives at Vrindavan.

Time passes too quickly. While the two brother-disciples were enjoying spiritual bliss in the holy atmosphere of Vrindavan, the news reached them that a tremendous success had attended the mission of Swami Vivekananda in America. They were so glad to see that the prophetic utterances of the Master with respect to their leader had come true. Swami Vivekananda was constantly writing to his Gurubhais to plunge themselves into work for the regeneration

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

of India as well as for the welfare of humanity. Repeated letters began to come from the monastery, which had now been removed to Alambazar from Baranagore, asking the two brothers at Vrindavan to return to Bengal, so that all might organise themselves together into a band for future work. At first Swami Turiyananda returned, and after some time he was followed also by Swami Brahmananda.

The arrival of the "Raja" at the Math created a great stir and enthusiasm. Everybody was so glad to have the privilege of his company. His very presence had an uplifting influence on the atmosphere. His placid countenance, calm look, indrawn thought, and, above all, extremely sweet behaviour indicated the great spiritual power hidden within him. As far as narrating his own spiritual experiences was concerned, Swami Brahmananda was always very taciturn. But anyone standing before him would invariably feel that he was in the presence of an extraordinary personality. When he returned to the Math, there was amongst the members a fresh wave of enthusiasm for spiritual development. The swami was glad to see that the message of Sri Ramakrishna made such a tremendous appeal to the world. Knowing the Master as he had, he was not surprised at that, but he wanted to make the Math a powerful vehicle for the spread of that message. Once he said to his Gurubhais: "Your life, your Math will be the source of solace, hope and inspiration to all who are weary and heavy-laden. Just build up your life

SWAMI BRAHMANANDA

accordingly." When Swami Vivekananda heard in America that "Raja" had returned to the Math, he was greatly relieved. For he had always a great regard for the judgment and opinion of Swami Brahmananda. And had not the Master said that Rakhal possessed the capability to rule a kingdom? Henceforward Swami Vivekananda would address most of his letters dealing with his future plan of work to Swami Brahmananda. Swami Vivekananda would give out his plans and principles in general, but it was Swami Brahmananda who saw to their practical applicability and gave them a definite shape. Swami Vivekananda fell upon the world like an avalanche. He moved like a whirlwind from one end of the world to the other to give his message. He was too busy and dynamic. He had no time, as he said, to give his message a finish. So far as the Ramakrishna Brotherhood was concerned Swami Brahmananda with his infinite calm and patience, extraordinary common sense and wisdom made that message fruitful in the soil of India. Swami Vivekananda came upon the world as a thundering voice. Swami Brahmananda's life was like a gentle dew that falls unknown and unperceived but brings in the rich autumnal harvest.

THE PRESIDENT OF THE RAMAKRISHNA MATH AND MISSION

Two years after Swami Brahmananda had returned to the Math, Swami Vivekananda also

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

returned to India. When the great Swami met Swami Brahmananda he handed over to the latter all the money he had collected for his Indian work, and said: "Now I am relieved. I have handed over the sacred trust to the right person." Swami Brahmananda was the "friend, philosopher and guide" of Swami Vivekananda in every respect. He took care of his health, gave advice about his plans, arranged his tours and put his ideas into action. When the Ramakrishna Mission Society was started Swami Vivekananda became the general President and Swami Brahmananda was made the President of the Calcutta centre. But in the beginning of 1902 Swami Vivekananda relinquished his position in favour of Swami Brahmananda, and the latter worked as the President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission till his last day.

The relation between Swami Vivekananda and Swami Brahmananda was wonderful, and very enjoyable to anyone who witnessed it. One was a born leader of men and a world mover, the other was a hidden reservoir of great spiritual power and loved to work silently. One gave out his message like a trumpet call, the other sought to spread influence mainly through silence and life. One was in the limelight, the other always wanted to be away from the public gaze. Both were beloved of the Master. Both were termed by the Master as *Nityasiddhas* or *Ishwarakotis*, that is, souls who are eternally free but come down to earth for the good and guidance of humanity. Both knew each other intimately

SWAMI BRAHMANANDA

from their school days, and their lifelong relationship only increased their love and respect for each other. When Swami Vivekananda returned from America he bowed down to Swami Brahmananda saying, "The son of the Guru is to be respected as much as the Guru himself." Swami Brahmananda too did not lag behind in his sense of humour. He returned the compliment saying, "To the elder brother is due the respect that is given to a father."

With this spiritual background the human relationship between the two was very interesting. Sometimes with his practical common sense and intimate knowledge of local affairs Swami Brahmananda had to modify plans given by Swami Vivekananda. At that the latter would at times become upset and wild. But afterwards when he understood his own mistake he showed repentance in such a way that the supposedly aggrieved party would feel embarrassed, and regret the suffering caused to the Swami. Swami Vivekananda was fond of animals. Swami Brahmananda was a lover of plants and gardens. When the animals of the one would cause damage to the garden of the other there would ensue a quarrel, the very seriousness of which would cause side-splitting laughter to the bystanders.

Swami Vivekananda had infinite faith in the loyalty of Swami Brahmananda to his cause. He would say: "Others may desert me. But Raja will stand by me till the last." The two giants put their shoulders together to further the cause of the work started in the name of the

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Master. The new monastery at Belur was established in 1899. A permanent centre was started in Madras, another was opened in the retreat of the Himalayas. Others were growing. Preachers were sent to England and America. The work was growing apace. But the two Swamis could not work together long. The life of Swami Vivekananda was prematurely cut short in the year 1902.

The passing away of the leader was a great blow to the work he had started. And it was a great shock to his Gurubhais, specially to Swami Brahmananda on whom the whole responsibility now fell and who was looked up to for guidance by the whole institution.

But love for the leader meant love for his work and for the Mission he had started. And behind the Mission of the leader was the will of the Master. So Swami Brahmananda, with his usual calmness, suppressing the feeling of personal bereavement at the passing away of Swami Vivekananda, turned his attention to the discharge of the duties that devolved on him.

There were critics who thought that in the absence of Swami Vivekananda his work would be stranded or would die a natural death. But Swami Vivekananda as a spirit was no less a power than Swami Vivekananda in his physical body. He himself once said, "I am a voice without body." Yes, that voice even at the absence of the body began to ring in the ears of his brother-disciples, personal disciples and innumerable admirers and devotees. Their love

SWAMI BRAHMANANDA

and respect for him were spontaneously translated into enthusiasm for the furtherance of his cause, so it was no wonder that the organisation soon recovered from the shock and the work began to grow and expand as a matter of course. At such a critical time the Ramakrishna Math and Mission was fortunate to have at their helm ■ personality like Swami Brahmananda.

The method of work of Swami Brahmananda was wonderful. Though he would be working hard and though his responsibility was too great for any ordinary mortal, his calmness was never disturbed, the serenity of his mind was never ruffled. About the secret of work he once said: "Give the whole of your mind to God. If there is no wastage of mental energy, with a fraction of your mind you can do so much work that the world will be dazed." The truth of this was exemplified in the life of the Swami himself. Who could have believed on seeing him that he was bearing such a heavy burden? It seemed rather as if he was indifferent to what was going on outside with regard to the organisation and that his whole mind was given to God. It was as if only by an effort that he could bring his mind down to mundane things. His far away look, his half-closed eyes, deeply calm composure indicated that his thoughts did not belong to this plane of existence. He would very often be so much lost in his own thought that one would not dare approach him lest one should disturb him. But yet he was aware of the very details of the work that was going on. He had intimate

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

knowledge of the minds of the different members working even in distant centres. He could read characters at a glance and guide them accordingly. Every member of the vast organisation felt that his interest was safe in the hands of the Swami. His gentle wish was more than a command to all the workers.

The interests of the Swami were varied. He could give wise direction as to the design of a building, he could give plans as to how to do relief works, his suggestions on the methods of education were valued by educationists, his advice regarding the principles to be followed in editing books was at once found to be extremely sound, and in every Ashrama he visited or stayed in, he encouraged people to have flower and kitchen gardens. His love of flowers was great. He would consider that flowers blossomed forth in the gardens as the offerings of Nature to the All-pervading Deity. Anyone plucking a flower or injuring a flower plant would incur the greatest displeasure of the Swami. He would see that the accounts of public money were kept with the strictest regularity. He would not tolerate the slightest carelessness in this respect.

But beyond all these interests one could vividly see in him that here was a mind which could not be brought down to the level of ordinary work. It was very difficult to persuade the Swami to attend the meetings of the Trustees of the Math or of the Governing Body of the Mission. He had a happy knack of falling "slightly indisposed" on such occasions or of giving

SWAMI BRAHMANANDA

suggestions that the meeting might be postponed. Those who were responsible for convening such meetings had a hard time with the Swami in this respect. They felt that they were trying to bring within the constitution of the law a soul which eternally soared above all laws. They felt greatly pained at the thought of what a great torture it meant to the Swami. But once he could be brought to the meeting his opinions and suggestions were invaluable. Experiences showed that his counsels were so very correct that nobody, even in the course of the debate, would afterwards feel inclined to dispute what he had said. And there was hardly any debate at such meetings. What the Swami would say or even remotely suggest would invariably be accepted by all. Swami Saradananda, who was the Secretary of the Ramakrishna Mission, once said to a young worker, "When I say a thing, you should judge and discriminate whether I am right or wrong, but when Maharaj (meaning Swami Brahmananda) says a thing you may safely accept that as true without the slightest doubt." This was said by one who had vast organising ability and who had successfully guided innumerable undertakings.

Swami Brahmananda made several tours in North and South India, and once he went also to East Bengal and Assam. By the inspiration of his presence existing centres received a fresh impetus and new centres began to spring up. Wherever he would go there came a crowd of visitors—young and old—to see him. They

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

were invariably so much impressed by his love, kindness and the force of his personality, that they became lifelong friends and supporters of the Mission. When he visited a centre he would not go so much into the details of the work as he would be interested in giving the members a spiritual uplift. He would say that one cannot do really unselfish work unless one's whole mind is given to God. Now this was exactly the thing he was interested in with regard to the work, viz. whether they were working in the spirit of service of God or only passing their days in a humdrum way. He would say to the monks, "Fie on you, if after giving up the world, cutting yourself from the love of your parents and relatives, you cannot devote the whole of your energy to the realisation of God." He would exhort one and all to make the realisation of God the one and only aim of their lives. He would say: "Create dissatisfaction in your mind even by an effort. Ask yourself whether you are devoting the whole of your energy to your spiritual welfare. Ask yourself at night how much of the time has been spent in communion with God and how much in other things. The time that has not been given to God has been spent in vain, has been wasted."

Strange to say, though he laid the main emphasis on spiritual growth, the work of the Mission was steadily growing under his care. He raised the humanitarian work of the Mission to a spiritual level. Mere humanitarian work without any spiritual motive behind it leads to egotism and pride and becomes a danger to one's

spiritual life. But, unselfish work done in a proper spirit, in a spirit of humble service, conduces to one's spiritual welfare and leads to God. That is what the Swami wanted. "We have to work so hard that we do not get sufficient time for meditation," said a disciple to the Swami, thinking he would get sympathy from one whose whole mind was given to God. "You should feel ashamed to say that, my child," replied the Swami. "You are monks, you ought not to complain of hard work. It is not the quantity of work but the vagaries of the mind that create obstacles in the way of meditation." "Just sacrifice this one life for the sake of the work of Swamiji (Swami Vivekananda), even if you consider it a loss. Have you not lived countless lives before? But if you give yourself up wholeheartedly to his cause, rest assured, through his grace, your spiritual life will progress with the speed of a rocket," he once said to a disciple who inquired whether the work started by Swami Vivekananda was consistent with the orthodox form of Sadhana. "Don't be ungrateful to Swamiji," he said to some young men on another occasion. "He worked himself to death for you and the country. Just plunge yourself into his work and repay the debt due to him."

Swami Brahmananda would not often talk of spiritual things. It would be very difficult to draw him into spiritual conversations. But when he would talk, his words would scintillate with fire, and those who would hear would get a life-long inspiration.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

As a result of his influence many young men began to join the Order. Sometimes a doubting mind would find its scepticism vanish by merely coming into his presence. One could rarely argue with him, nor was he given to theoretical discussions. His presence was enough to solve many complex problems which had troubled people for many, many weary years. Innumerable persons had such experiences.

Wherever he would go there would be so much joyous festivity that all found themselves drowned in it. But there was this characteristic about it, that it was highly uplifting. Once there was so much disaffection amongst the members in a certain centre that the whole atmosphere was vitiated. When all other remedies failed Swami Brahmananda was approached and persuaded to visit the centre. When he went to the place he did not at all inquire into the grievances of the individual members. His presence created such a great wave of spiritual enthusiasm that all petty problems were automatically solved. Everyone was astonished at this wonderful phenomenon.

After the passing away of Swami Vivekananda, the first thing that Swami Brahmananda gave his attention to was the consolidation of the work at headquarters. After about two years, when he had put the day-to-day work of the organisation in the hands of Swami Saradananda and the management of the Belur Math in charge of another Gurubhai, Swami Brahmananda left for Benares. In Benares at that time there was a

SWAMI BRAHMANANDA

centre of the Ramakrishna Math, called Advaita Ashrama, meant exclusively for meditative life, and there was also a philanthropic institution started by some young men under the inspiration of Swami Vivekananda. When Swami Brahmananda reached Benares the committee of the latter institution formally handed over the management to the Ramakrishna Mission. The Swami stayed at Benares for about a month and improved the management of both the institutions. Some years later, on another visit, the Swami laid the foundation-stone of the Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service on a new plot of land. Some of the buildings that have been constructed there were according to his own plan and design.

From Benares he went to Kankhal, near Hardwar, where Swami Kalyanananda, a young disciple of the Order, had started medical work for the sick and the needy. In the quiet of the holy atmosphere at Kankhal the Swami remained day and night absorbed in divine communion, his very look indicating that here was one whose mind rested on the Self and whose thoughts were centred in the Atman. Here as elsewhere his silent presence gave impetus to the work of the institution and the Ashrama began to improve after he had been there. From Hardwar the Swami went to Vrindavan where Swami Turiyananda was practising Tapasya. Arriving at Vrindavan, Swami Brahmananda again felt an urge to devote himself exclusively to Tapasya. He stayed at Vrindavan for a period, along with

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Swami Turiyananda, spending his time in hard spiritual practices. He would at that time get up regularly at midnight for meditation. It is said that one night he was fast asleep and the time to get up was almost over when he suddenly felt a push. He woke up, to find a good spirit beckoning and reminding him to meditate.

From Vrindavan the Swami went to Allahabad, where one of his brother-disciples was staying and building up the nucleus of the future Ramakrishna centre. He next went to Vindhya-chal, ■ sacred place of pilgrimage associated with the memory of the Divine Mother. At this place the Swami was in a highly ecstatic mood. It is said that at the temple of the Divine Mother one night he asked an attendant to sing some song. As the Swami stood before the Divine Presence listening to the song, tears flowed down his cheeks, and soon he was so much absorbed in communion that he lost all outward consciousness and the bystanders had to take care of him. He had a similar experience in another temple at Vindhya-chal. After staying at this holy place for a few days, the Swami returned to the monastery at Belur.

In the month of June, 1906, he went to Puri in order to recover his health which had been seriously impaired by an attack of typhoid. The climate as well as the spiritual atmosphere suited him exactly. Of all the holy places he liked Benares, Vrindavan, Puri and Hardwar most. When at Benares he would be full of the thoughts of Vishwanath and Annapurna, the presiding

SWAMI BRAHMANANDA

deities; at Vrindavan the association of Sri Krishna would throw his mind into ecstasy; at Puri his emotion would be stirred by the remembrance of Chaitanya and Jagannath, whereas at Hardwar his mind would be absorbed in contemplation of the all-pervading Presence. At different places he would be in different moods—every one as inspiring as another.

In October, 1908, at the earnest request of Swami Ramakrishnananda, head of the Ramakrishna Math at Madras, Swami Brahmananda started for South India. With his wonderful devotion Swami Ramakrishnananda considered Swami Brahmananda as a veritable representative of the Master on earth. So when Swami Brahmananda arrived at Madras, Swami Ramakrishnananda told the innumerable devotees who came to see the new Swami: "You have not seen the Master. Just make your life blessed by seeing his beloved son." The childlike simplicity and very unassuming nature of the Swami, hiding within an extraordinary spiritual personality, made a wonderful impression wherever he went. If anybody would approach the Swami with a question, he would now and then say with his inborn humility: "Just go to Sasi (meaning Swami Ramakrishnananda). He is a great scholar. He will solve your question." But if the inquirer persisted and could persuade the Swami to speak, his words would remove a heavy load from the mind of the aspirant.

In those days the gulf of separation in the social lives of Brahmins and non-Brahmins

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

was much greater in Southern India. The Brahmins were more rigidly orthodox and the non-Brahmins were kept at a greater distance. When Swami Brahmananda was staying at Madras Math, a non-Brahmin devotee invited him to his house. The Swami accepted the invitation readily. And in the house of that devotee, along with the Swami, Brahmins, non-Brahmins, Christians, Brahmos, all took their meal together. There was no fuss about social reform in this inter-dining. It was inspired by a spontaneous feeling that arose in the presence of the Swami: that there was no distinction of caste or creed in the soul, that in the eye of God every one was equal.

From Madras City he went on a pilgrimage to Rameshwaram and Madura. It is said that as the Swami entered the temple of Minakshi at Madura he began to utter the name of the Mother like a child, and he lost soon all outward consciousness. Swami Ramakrishnananda, who accompanied him, immediately took hold of the Swami lest he should fall down. It was nearly an hour after when he came down to the normal consciousness. Swami Brahmananda usually had great control over his religious emotion. Rarely could a person detect what was going on within him. His spiritual experiences, of which he had a great many as circumstantial evidences indicate, are a sealed book to the outside world. But at times a flood-tide of feeling would break down all barriers of control even in such a powerful personality as that of Swami Brahmananda.

SWAMI BRAHMANANDA

and the bystanders could see outward signs of his spiritual experience. Two or three other similar incidents in the life of the Swami can be cited. But as soon as he came to the ordinary plane he would betray signs of embarrassment at not having been able to keep his spiritual experience shut out from public view.

From Madura he returned to Madras and from there went to Bangalore to open the new building of the monastery in Mysore State.

It was in July, 1916, that the Swami went to visit the South for the second time. During this visit on August 4, he laid the foundation-stone of the new building of the Ramakrishna Math at Madras and after a week went to Bangalore. At Bangalore an incident happened which indicates how wide and deep was the sympathy of the Swami. At the monastery at Bangalore many untouchables would meet in the main hall for prayer and worship. Swami Brahmananda was specially pleased at this sight. One day, of his own accord, the Swami suddenly visited the quarters of the untouchables, saw the shrine-room they had built and encouraged and blessed them. It was beyond the farthest limit of their imagination that the Swami, whose presence had created a stir amongst the elite of the town and to see whom even the big people of the place were very eager, could feel so interested in them as to go to their place unasked and to mix with them so freely.

This time the Swami visited many sacred places in the South including some in Malabar and

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Travancore. On May 6, 1917, he laid the foundation-stone of the new building of the Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home in Madras and soon after left for Bengal. During this visit he was very pleased to see that the number of persons who showed interest in the message of the Master was rapidly on the increase. Even in distant Malabar and Travancore centres were growing and the devotees of the Master and of Swami Vivekananda were becoming innumerable. Swami Brahmananda in this visit laid the foundation-stone of an Ashrama on a beautiful spot on the top of a hill in Trivandrum overlooking the sea.

The Swami went to the South for the last time in 1920. This time he opened the new spacious building of the Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home in Madras.

In the meantime, in 1916, he went to Dacca in East Bengal to lay the foundation-stone of the local Ramakrishna Mission on a new site. He took advantage of this occasion to visit the holy place at Kamakhya. The Swami went to Mymensingh and visited Narayangunge as also Deobhog, the birth-place of Durga Charan Nag, a great devotee of the Master.

Wherever the Swami went there was unusual enthusiasm, and people showed spontaneous expression of great devotion to the cause of the Mission. Thus these visits of Swami Brahmananda always laid the foundation of the future activity and expansion of the work of the Mission. But he himself was unconcerned about these

SWAMI BRAHMANANDA

things. He simply depended on the will of the Master and felt glad, with the naivety of a child, that the message of the Master was spreading like wild fire.

It has been mentioned that he went to North India several times. He would usually stay at Benares or Kankhal and visit other sacred places occasionally. Whenever he visited a sacred place or a temple a large number of monks and devotees would accompany him, for to go with him was to get an added inspiration. On such occasions he would sometimes take with him those who could sing and ask them to sing devotional songs in the presence of the Deity. The combined effect of all these was simply marvellous. Those who were present on such occasions would feel an experience which they could never forget. They would be lifted up to a plane beyond the reach of any earthliness. And the one who was the centre of all this would remain absorbed within himself almost oblivious of his surroundings. Once while he was hearing devotional music in Ayodhya standing in front of the Deity, there came a downpour. The Swami stood steadfast almost unconscious of the rains. Others came hurriedly and took care of him. It was long after the rains had ceased that the Swami came back to the conscious plane.

He had a great love for music. Latterly wherever he would be there was devotional music in the evening. The Swami would sit quiet in the midst and his very serenity would create such an atmosphere that nobody would

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

dare whisper a word lest there should be disturbance. On such occasions the listeners enjoyed the blessings of a spiritual bath, as it were.

A GREAT PERSONALITY

With respect to Swami Brahmananda, Sri Ramakrishna used to say in his inimitable homely way, "Rakhal is like a mango which does not give any outward indication when ripe." He meant that Rakhal had within him great spiritual potentiality which he would always keep hidden from the outside world. But in spite of all the attempts of Swami Brahmananda to keep his powers hidden, when his spiritual personality began to unfold itself people in larger and larger numbers began to flock to him. And they were of all classes—actors and dramatists, lawyers and doctors, old and young men. They all wondered what was in him that attracted them so much, but they could not help going to him. He would not necessarily talk of spiritual things with them. As a matter of fact the Swami was very taciturn in that respect. He would talk of all sorts of things, but if any spiritual question was put to him he would look grave, and the questioner would not like to press his point. But still there were many who would feel miserable if they had not seen the Swami at least once in the course of the day.

Perhaps one of the secrets of this magnetic attraction was his deep love for one and all. But there was hardly any sentimental expression

SWAMI BRAHMANANDA

of his love. He would say, "The love that expresses itself outwardly is not sufficiently deep." Behind his silence people could not gauge how great was his love for them. They would feel drawn by a strong current, as it were, but they could not understand the why and wherefore of it. Innumerable were the lives that were changed by his touch. Many would come with whom he would crack jokes and make fun, but afterwards they would find to their great astonishment that their lives had taken a new turn. There were persons who thought no sacrifice too great to fulfil his slightest wish. Many young men, caught in the current of his love, gave up the world and worldly prospects. They felt that in comparison with the love they got from him, the love of their parents dwindled into nothingness.

For a long time the Swami would not make any personal disciple. It was very hard to get initiation from him. He felt himself too humble for that. But latterly he was more liberal in this respect. The method of his giving initiation was novel. Once he said that in giving initiation he had to find out through deep meditation the exact Mantra and the Chosen Deity of the disciple. Unless he could do that he would not give initiation. He was conscious of the fact that to make a disciple is to take upon oneself the spiritual responsibility of the person concerned. And until the disciple gets his salvation the Guru willingly forgoes his own desire for that. Naturally he was careful to give initiation to only those

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

who were really earnest about their spiritual life. That was also the reason why he would not easily talk about spiritual things. Those who were genuine seekers would get proper—nay tremendous, guidance from him. But those who were half-hearted and dilettante would find no response from him in this respect.

His human relationship was wonderful. We have seen how everybody felt the touch of his infinite love. From the leaders of thought and of society down to a humble servant every one was the recipient of great consideration from him. His courtesy and dignity were remarkable and betrayed more a prince than a monk, or do they not apply equally to both? He had actually the majestic appearance of a prince. If nothing else, his mere appearance compelled reverence from others.

But when he made fun or played with children, who would take him to be Swami Brahmananda, the head of the Ramakrishna Order, before whom the monks bowed and big men felt themselves small? He was then just like a child, and the children considered him as surely one of them. His fund of humour was great, and no less was his capacity for mischief-making. One of his Gurubhais wanted to leave him and go to his field of work when there was urgency. Swami Brahmananda reluctantly agreed to the proposal. A palanquin was engaged which would carry the Gurubhai to the railway station for the night train. Before the palanquin started Swami Brahmananda whispered something to

SWAMI BRAHMANANDA

the bearers. The bearers instead of going to the station walked and walked throughout the whole night to the tune of their droning sound of "hoom, hoom" and returned with the inattentive Gurubhai at sunrise to the place from which they had started. Swami Brahmananda came out and greeted his brother there gravely. The Gurubhai realised the mischief. The condition of his mind can well be imagined; but he did not know whether to get angry or to admire the cleverness of his brother. It was difficult to cope with Swami Brahmananda in such matters. He was without a parallel.

The last important act of Swami Brahmananda was to build under his personal supervision an Ashrama at Bhubaneshwar, some miles from Puri. He was of the opinion that Bhubaneshwar had such a spiritual atmosphere that progress would be very rapid if Sadhana was performed there. He saw that many monks of the Order had to work so hard that they did not find sufficient time for spiritual practices. And those who went to Rishikesh and other places exclusively for Tapasya broke down their health by too much hardship. He desired very much that there should be a place where the monks could get proper facilities for spiritual practices. The Ashrama has a big compound with well-laid gardens and a vast open space around. He had an idea of personally carrying out the development of the place according to his plan and desire; but he was not able to see his dream fulfilled.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

THE PASSING AWAY

After his last Madras tour he went to Bengal stopping on the way for some time at Bhuvaneshwar. While at the headquarters he sometimes went from Belur to the house of Balaram Bose in Calcutta and stayed there. The house of Balaram Bose is a place of pilgrimage to the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna; for to this house the Master went many, many times, so that the place was just like a second home to the monks of the Ramakrishna Mission. In the last week of March, 1922, Swami Brahmananda went to stay at the house of Balaram Bose. Suddenly on March 24, he had an attack of cholera. The best doctors were called in, the best attendants were engaged. But he had hardly recovered from the attack when symptoms of diabetes developed which took an alarming turn. Out of great anxiety different kinds of treatment were tried, different physicians were called in, but there was no sign of any improvement. He had great suffering attended with various ailments. But even in that state he began to talk of high spiritual things punctuated with masterly strokes of sudden humour. In a great spirit of compassion he began to bless one and all. The devotees were alarmed lest this should mean his bidding farewell. Sri Ramakrishna had one day had a vision that floating on the waters of the Ganges there came a thousand-petalled lotus illumining the whole surrounding. On the lotus stood a boy holding the hands of Sri Krishna. When

SWAMI BRAHMANANDA

the Master first met Rakhal he identified him as that boy. But he kept that vision secret, giving it out only to a select few, and said that if Rakhal knew this fact of identity he would give up his body. Now Swami Brahmananda, in an ecstatic state, began to refer to just such a vision as that of the Master. People grew more alarmed at this. Another day passed. The following evening, on April 10, Swami Brahmananda closed his eyes in deep Samadhi, and the spirit which had put on mortal flesh for the benefit of humanity fled away.

Indeed, to see Swami Brahmananda was tangibly to feel that he did not belong to this world, that he belonged to a separate plane of existence. He was in a class by himself. He was far above the level of humanity, but still he lived and moved with it as if to fulfil a divine purpose. Even a sceptic would feel this, and even a person knowing nothing about him would realise it. Those who had known both Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Brahmananda used to say that Swami Brahmananda represented some of the characteristics of the Master; there was some similarity even in physical appearance.

So long as the devotees and disciples lived with the Swami they were enveloped in ceaseless bliss. The thought did never come to them at any time that there would be an end of it. But when the biblical "bridegroom" was taken away, they suddenly came to the sense of from what a great height they had fallen. As far as the organisation was concerned, its main pillar was removed, its very foundation was shaken. By his silent

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

and imperceptible influence he had raised the organisation to such a height of prestige and standard of perfection that to the public eye it had become almost synonymous with infallibility. But now everybody felt as if a great Himalayan peak had suddenly been bodily removed. Everyone began to ask himself, "Now, what about the future?" And those who had moved with him closely thought within themselves, "Was it a fact that we lived with a soul like that of Swami Brahmananda? Indeed, what have we done to deserve that blessed privilege?" A great dream had faded away all too suddenly.



Swami Saradananda

II

SWAMI SARADANANDA

BOYHOOD

To a Ramakrishna Math, in North Calcutta, known as "Udbodhan House" to the public or as the "Holy Mother's Abode" to the devotees, there came a visitor some years back. As he entered the building, in a small room on the left-hand side of the entrance he saw a burly-looking person sitting cross-legged—wrapped in his own thought. The visitor, quite a stranger to the place, inquired of him who he was. "I am here the gate-keeper," came the grave reply. The innocent man believed this, and went to the next room—which was the office room. There in the course of conversation when he asked some one who the man was whom he had first met, he learnt that the grave-looking person was no other than Swami Saradananda, the Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. The visitor felt so embarrassed at his foolishness in believing that the Swami could be a gate-keeper, that he at once left the place.

Yes, Swami Saradananda took a pride in considering himself a "gate-keeper" of the house where the Holy Mother,¹ the divine consort of

¹See Appendix.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Sri Ramakrishna lived, and every evening whoever visited the house was sure to see the Swami sitting there. Strangers would be scared away or frightened by his very grave appearance, but those who were bold enough to approach and mix with him, would know that here was a man who had a mother's heart. Swami Saradananda lived in this house from the time of its construction, when he had had it built for the Holy Mother to stay in during her visits to Calcutta. Here he would be doing the onerous duties of the Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, sitting in that particular room as a "gate-keeper."

Swami Saradananda came of a rich and orthodox Brahmin family, living in Amherst Street of Calcutta. His early name was Sarat Chandra Chakravarti. His grandfather was an erudite Sanskrit scholar—with a very religious disposition. He lived in a village in the Twenty-four Perganas, where he established a Tol (school for Sanskrit study) and maintained many students. Sarat Chandra's father, however, removed to Calcutta, and became very rich by being the co-sharer of a medicine shop. But his wealth and religious nature existed side by side. He was known for his honesty, truthfulness and great charity. He devoted much time to religious practices amidst the busy life he had to live. Sarat Chandra inherited many of the good qualities of his father.

Sarat Chandra was born in the month of December, 1865. But as he was born on a

Saturday evening, many were alarmed as to the future of the child. But an uncle of Sarat Chandra, expert in astrology, after proper calculation removed all fears by the prediction that the new-born babe would be so great that he would shed lustre on his family.

From his very boyhood Sarat Chandra was known for his gravity. He was so quiet that he could be mistaken to be not very intelligent. But soon he showed his extraordinary intelligence in class works. In almost all examinations he topped the list of successful boys. He took delight in many extra-academic activities. He was a prominent figure in the debating class and developed a strong physique by taking various forms of physical exercise.

His deep religious nature expressed itself even in his early boyhood. He would sit quietly by the side of his mother when she was engaged in worshipping the family deity, and afterwards faultlessly repeat the ritual before his friends. On festive occasions he would want images of deities and not the dolls which average lads buy. Seeing this trait in his nature, his mother bought for him a set of utensils required in performing Pujas. Sarat was greatly delighted, and for a long time the play which interested him most was to perform imitation-worship. After he was invested with the sacred thread, he was privileged to perform regular worship in the family shrine. This made him glad beyond measure. And he took full advantage of this opportunity by performing the regular worship of the family deity.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

He was also strict about the daily meditations required of a Brahmin boy.

Sarat was very courteous by nature. He was incapable of using any harsh word to anybody or of hurting anyone's feelings in any way. He had a very soft and feeling heart. He lost no opportunity to help his poor class-friends as far as his means permitted. The small sum of money which he got from home for tiffin, he often spent for poor boys. Sometimes he would give away his personal clothing to those who needed them more.

One who afterwards as Secretary of the Ramakrishna Mission administered relief to millions of suffering people showed himself to be the embodiment of the spirit of service even in his boyhood. Relations and friends, acquaintances and neighbours, servants and housemaids—whoever fell ill, Sarat Chandra was sure to be by their side. In cases of contagious diseases, when people would fight shy of patients, Sarat Chandra, prompted by a spontaneous feeling of love, would go to nurse the case, without the least thought of the risk involved. Once a maid-servant in a neighbouring house fell ill of cholera. The master removed her to a corner on the roof of his house to prevent contagion, and left her there to die. But as soon as Sarat Chandra came to know of this, he rushed to the spot and all alone did everything that was necessary for her nursing. The poor woman died in spite of all his devoted service. Finding the master indifferent about her last rites, Sarat made arrangement

even for that. This was but one among many instances of this kind.

For all these qualities of head and heart Sarat Chandra commanded not only the love but the silent admiration of one and all—including his friends and teachers.

As he grew up he came under the influence of the great Brahmo leader Keshab Chandra Sen. Those were the days when every educated young man became an admirer of that great orator. In the debating class of his school Sarat Chandra came into contact with some boys who were members of the New Dispensation established by Keshab Chandra Sen. Through various discussions with these boys, Sarat Chandra felt drawn towards the New Dispensation. Gradually he began to study literature in connection with the Samaj and even to practise meditation according to its system.

In 1882 Sarat Chandra passed the University Entrance Examination from the Hare School and the next year he got himself admitted into St. Xavier's College. Father Laffront was then the Principal of that college. Being charmed with the deep religious nature of Sarat Chandra, the Principal himself undertook to teach him the Bible.

Though born in an orthodox Brahmin family where all the important Hindu rituals were observed, his mother a great devotee of the family deity, his father and uncle great followers of Tantrikism, Sarat Chandra became an admirer of the Brahmo Samaj and a votary of Jesus.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

But he did not lose the slightest faith in the system in which he was brought up. This speaks of the great catholicity and broad-mindedness of young Sarat. And soon he was to come under the influence of one who practically demonstrated the underlying truths of all religions.

AT THE FEET OF THE MASTER

Sarat had a cousin—Sasi, who also stayed in the same family and read in the same college. Once a class-friend of Sasi told that there was a great saint in the temple-garden of Dakshineswar about whom Keshab Chandra had written in glowing terms in the *Indian Mirror*. In the course of conversation the three decided that one day they would visit the saint.

It was on a certain day in October, 1883, that Sarat and Sasi were at Dakshineswar. They went to see Sri Ramakrishna, who received them very cordially. After preliminary inquiries when the Master learnt that they now and then went to Keshab's Brahmo Samaj, he was very pleased. Then he said, "Bricks and tiles, if burnt after the trade-mark has been stamped on them, retain these marks for ever. But nowadays parents marry their boys too young. By the time they finish their education, they are already the fathers of children and have to run hither and thither in search of a job to maintain the family." "Then, sir, is it wrong to marry? Is it against the will of God?" asked one from the audience. Sri Ramakrishna asked him to take down one of the books from the shelf and

read aloud an extract from the Bible setting forth Christ's opinion on marriage: "For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb; there are some eunuchs which were made eunuchs of men; and there be eunuchs which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive let him receive." And St. Paul's: "I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn." When the passage was read, Sri Ramakrishna remarked that marriage was the root of all bondage. One among the audience interrupted him saying, "Do you mean to say, sir, that marriage is against the will of God? And how can His creation go on if people cease to marry?" Sri Ramakrishna smiled and said, "Don't worry about that. Those who like to marry are at perfect liberty to do so. What I said just now was between ourselves. I say what I have got to say; you may take as much or as little of it as you like."

These stirring words of renunciation opened up a new vision to Sarat and Sasi. Both were charmed by the personality of Sri Ramakrishna. They thought that if they were to seek God they must come to him for advice and guidance. They began actually to do that also. But afterwards they would not come to Dakshineswar together. Each kept his religious aspirations to himself, so the other did not know for a long time that he was so drawn to the saint of Dakshineswar. St.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Xavier's College, where Sarat was reading, remained closed on Thursdays. Sarat made it a rule to visit Dakshineswar every Thursday unless something very important stood in the way. As he came more and more in touch with Sri Ramakrishna, he was more and more attracted towards him. Sarat Chandra often wondered within himself, how it was that Sri Ramakrishna's love was stronger and more intense than anybody else's love which he had experienced in the world? The love he got from his friends, relations and even parents paled into insignificance compared with what he had been receiving from Sri Ramakrishna. Yet Sri Ramakrishna was absolutely unselfish. Sarat Chandra was caught in the current of his love.

Sri Ramakrishna also noticed the spiritual potentiality of the boy at the very first sight and was glad to see his stern spirit of renunciation. He began to give directions and to watch the spiritual development of young Sarat. One day Sri Ramakrishna was seated in his room at Dakshineswar surrounded by a group of devotees. Ganesh, the Hindu god of success, was the topic of conversation. The Master praised highly the integrity of character of this deity, his utter absence of passion and single-minded devotion to his mother, the goddess Durga. Young Sarat was present. Suddenly he said, "Well, sir, I like the character of Ganesh very much. He is my ideal." The Master at once corrected him saying, "No, Ganesh is not your ideal. Your ideal is Shiva. You possess Shiva-attributes."

Then he added, "Think of yourself, always, as Shiva and of me as Shakti. I am the ultimate repository of all your powers." It is not for us ordinary mortals to understand correctly the significance of this spiritual prescription. But in later years whoever came into contact with Swami Saradananda did not fail to notice in him a serenity of mind, patience, fortitude, calmness and a readiness to share the burdens of others, which are the special characteristics of Shiva. Verily he drank "poison" from many a cup of life, giving others in return his heartfelt benedictions and blessings.

On another occasion the Master asked Sarat, "How would you like to realise God? What divine visions do you prefer to see in meditation?" Sarat replied, "I do not want to see any particular form of God in meditation. I want to see Him as manifested in all creatures of the world. I do not like visions." The Master said with a smile, "That is the last word in spiritual attainment. You cannot have it all at once." "But I won't be satisfied with anything short of that," replied the boy, "I shall trudge on in the path of religious practice till that blessed state arrives." This clearly indicates the high spiritual aspirations of Sarat even in that early age.

Sarat Chandra had once met Narendranath—afterwards Swami Vivekananda—even before he came to Sri Ramakrishna. But at that time Sarat Chandra had formed a very wrong impression about one whom afterwards he loved and

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

followed as a leader. Sarat Chandra had once gone to see ■ friend in central Calcutta about whom the report was that he had gone astray. Sarat Chandra went there to know for himself by personal inquiry about the real state of affairs. At the house of the friend Sarat Chandra met a young man who seemed to be self-conceited and whose manners were anything but decorous. By seeing this visitor in the house of his friend, Sarat Chandra came to the conclusion that it was by mixing with this young man that his friend had gone wrong. But in the course of the conversation which this young man had had with his friend, when he showed his wide sweep of learning, deep breadth of thought and withal a *great critical acumen*, Sarat Chandra had been a bit perplexed. Sarat Chandra however could not change the first impression he had formed. He thought that the young man perhaps knew how to talk big but that there was a great disparity between his words and actions.

A few months after this Sri Ramakrishna was greatly praising a young man named Narendra Nath. He was speaking so highly of him that Sarat Chandra felt tempted to have a personal acquaintance with such a person, and got his address from Sri Ramakrishna. And what was his wonder when on meeting Narendra Nath Sarat found that he was none other than the young man whom once he had met at the house of his friend and about whom he had formed such an uncharitable opinion! How deceptive sometimes is the external appearance!

SWAMI SARADANANDA

The first acquaintance soon ripened into close friendship through the tie of common ideals and aspirations and the common love and reverence for the same saint who was moulding their lives equally. So great was their attachment for each other that sometimes Sarat Chandra and Narendra Nath could be found in the streets of Calcutta, deeply engaged in conversation, till one o'clock in the morning—walking the distance between their homes many times—one intending to escort the other to the latter's home. Sarat Chandra afterwards used to say, "However freely Swami Vivekananda mixed with us, at the very first meeting I saw that here was one who belonged to a class by himself."

One interesting incident happened when Narendra Nath once went inside the house of Sarat Chandra. It was in the winter of 1884. Sarat and Sasi came to the house of Narendra Nath at noon. *Conversation warmed up and all forgot how time passed.* Narendra Nath was talking about his extraordinary experiences with Sri Ramakrishna. The listeners heard with rapt attention. The talks opened up an unknown world for them, and they began to see Sri Ramakrishna in a new light. So long they had thought that Sri Ramakrishna was only a saint. Now on hearing what Narendra Nath had experienced with Sri Ramakrishna they began to think he was as great as Jesus or any other Prophet of similar rank. Nay, from what they heard about Sri Ramakrishna that day, their doubts regarding the authenticity of many

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

incidents in the life of Jesus vanished. In the course of the conversation the day passed into evening. Narendra Nath took them to Cornwallis Square for an evening stroll. There also the conversation continued, broken by a song sung by him. Sarat Chandra felt as if the world around faded into a dream and an unseen world became tangible instead. Suddenly Sarat woke up to the consciousness of time as he heard a clock strike nine at night. Narendra Nath felt embarrassed to have detained them so long. To make amends he proceeded with them to give them his company for a little distance. But engaged in talk he came actually to the house of Sarat Chandra. As it was time for the night meal, Sarat Chandra requested him to take his meal there. Narendra Nath agreed. But as he entered the house, he stopped in astonishment. It seemed as if he had been in this house before, and knew every corridor, every room there ! He wondered if it could be the remembrance of any past life.

With reference to such incidents Narendra Nath irresistibly came to the conclusion that those with whom he was to come into close contact in this life, he had seen in some past incarnation.

Sri Ramakrishna was glad beyond measure when he learnt that Sarat Chandra had not only met Narendra Nath, but that a deep love had sprung up between the two. He remarked in his characteristic, homely way, "The mistress of the house knows which cover will go with which cooking utensil."

Sarat passed the First Arts Examination in 1885. His father wanted him to read medicine, specially as he had a pharmacy for which he had to employ a doctor. But Sarat Chandra had no aspiration to be a doctor as Sri Ramakrishna held very strong opinions against legal and medical professions. Sarat Chandra was in a fix. It was only on the encouragement of Narendra Nath—his friend, philosopher and guide—that Sarat Chandra joined the Calcutta Medical College.

But destiny willed that Sarat was not to become a medical man. Before he had been many months in the Medical College, one day while, along with some other devotees, he was having dinner at the house of a common friend, Narendra Nath brought the anxious news that Sri Ramakrishna was ill—there was serious bleeding from his throat. The news cast a deep gloom over the whole party. And everybody was eager to do what best could be done to cure the disease.

Sri Ramakrishna was removed to Calcutta for better facilities of treatment. Under the leadership of Narendra Nath, devotees and disciples began to attend Sri Ramakrishna day and night. At first Sarat Chandra used to come to Shyampukur—where Sri Ramakrishna stayed—daily from his home, but soon he began to stay there day and night. Sasi, his cousin, also did the same. When Sri Ramakrishna was removed to Cossipore, they followed him there.

Sarat Chandra's father was alarmed at this

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

turn of mind of his son. Will the boy give up home altogether? All events indicated that! Sarat Chandra had never any interest in worldly things. Now it seemed he was going to be swept off his feet. Sarat was the eldest son—the future hope and prop of the whole family. The father shuddered at the very idea that the son would cease connection with the family. Jagannath Tarkalankar, the famous Pandit and an adept in Tantrika Sadhana, was the family preceptor. Leaving aside such a capable preceptor should Sarat follow another person! Girish Chandra, Sarat's father, one day took Pandit Jagannath Tarkalankar to Sri Ramakrishna at Cossipore. His idea was that in the course of conversation between the family preceptor and Ramakrishna it would transpire what a pigmy the latter was in comparison with the former, and Sarat would clearly see his folly in giving up the family Guru. But in a moment's talk, an adept like the Pandit found that he was in the presence of a blazing fire. He was stupefied to see the spiritual height of Sri Ramakrishna—so rare in the present age. Secretly he told Girish that his son should be considered blessed to have such a Guru. The last ray of hope that Girish Chandra had of taking his son back home vanished.

Now Sarat Chandra, with his characteristic zeal for serving the sick and diseased, began to do all that lay in his power to nurse back to health one who was the guiding star of his life. To serve Sri Ramakrishna became the only concern of his

life. It was not only a matter of love and devotion with him, but he had the spontaneous belief that thereby he would get the highest that can be aspired after in spiritual life. On the first of January, 1886, Sri Ramakrishna in an ecstatic mood blessed many a devotee with a touch which lifted their minds to a great spiritual height. Finding that attitude of Sri Ramakrishna, all who were near by rushed to the spot to receive his blessings. But Sarat Chandra at that time was engaged in some duty allotted to him. Even the consideration of a spiritual windfall could not tempt him away from his duty. Afterwards, when asked as to why he did not go to Sri Ramakrishna at that time when there was the chance of getting a highly covetable spiritual experience, Sarat replied, "I did not feel any necessity for that. Why should I? Was not Sri Ramakrishna dearer than the dearest to me? Then what doubt was there but that he would give me, of his own accord, anything that I needed? So I did not feel the least anxiety."

One day the Master commanded the young disciples, in preparation for their prospective monastic life, to go out and beg their food. They readily obeyed. The boys coming from respectable families went out to beg their food just to get themselves trained as to how to depend on God for every thing and also to crush their pride of birth. But with their nice appearance they could hardly hide the fact that they belonged to good families. So when they went a-begging, they had varied experiences: some were pitied,

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

some were abused, some were treated with utmost sympathy. Sarat Chandra would afterwards narrate his own experience with a smile thus: "I entered a small village and stood before a house uttering the name of God just as the begging monks do. Hearing my call an elderly lady came out and when she saw my strong physique, at once she cried out in great contempt, 'With such a robust health are you not ashamed to live on alms? Why don't you become a tram conductor at least?' Saying this, she closed the door with a bang."

It is doubtful whether the young aspirant for Sannyasin's life felt sorry at this experience or enjoyed it as great fun.

When the news of the serious illness of Sri Ramakrishna spread amongst the devotees, crowds of visitors would come to Cossipore garden-house to see him. Also the mother and a younger brother of Sarat Chandra came several times to see the great saint. Sri Ramakrishna was greatly impressed by talking with the brother of Sarat Chandra and said to him, "Your brother has got spiritual potentiality more than what even you have. Should I attract him also?" Sarat was only too glad to hear that. What could give him greater joy than the fact that his brother also should be the recipient of the great bliss that he had been experiencing! So unhesitatingly Sarat replied, "Indeed, it will be a nice thing if you do that." Sri Ramakrishna remained pensive for a few moments and then said, "No, that would not be fair. Two from

the same family (meaning Sarat and Sasi) have already come. If he also comes, it will give very much pain to his mother."

Sri Ramakrishna's condition began to be worse and worse as days passed on. Best medical aid, most devoted nursing and the earnest prayer of all proved of no avail before the will of the Divine Mother. Sri Ramakrishna entered into Mahasamadhi after fulfilling his divine mission on earth.

The young disciples who banded together under the paternal care of Sri Ramakrishna at Cossipore garden had now no place to lay their heads in. Many of them had to go back home. But that was only temporary. The monastery at Baranagore was established within a short time, and one by one they began to join it.

When Sarat returned home, his parents were at rest. They thought he had changed his mind, and they were dreaming of the future worldly life of Sarat. But though staying at home Sarat's whole mind centred on the life and teachings of the Master. At this time Narendra Nath and Rakhal would come to his house now and then, and the subject of conversation was only how to build up life in the light of the message left behind by the Master.

Sarat Chandra would visit the monastery now and then, impelled by a burning longing for the Great Unknown. This alarmed the father of Sarat Chandra. Was his son planning for a life of renunciation? The father began to reason with Sarat: "So long as Sri Ramakrishna was alive,

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

it was all right that you lived with him—nursing and attending him. But now that he is no more, why not settle down at home?" But seeing that arguments had no effect, he locked Sarat Chandra within closed doors, so that he might not go and mix with the other young disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Sarat Chandra was not perturbed in the least. He began to spend his time in meditation and other spiritual practices. But as chance would have it, a younger brother of Sarat opened the door of the room out of sympathy for his elder brother, who then came out and fled to the monastery at Baranagore.

A few days after this some of the young disciples headed by Narendra Nath went to Antpur, the birth-place of Baburam (Swami Premananda), in the district of Hooghly. There one evening, round a sacred fire, the disciples sat and spent the whole night in vigils, and under the inspiration of Narendra Nath they all took the vows of Sannyasa before God and one another. Sarat also was in the party, and after returning from Antpur, he permanently joined the monastery at Baranagore.

THE CALL OF SANNYASA

When the parents of Sarat came to know of the decision Sarat had made, they one day came to Baranagore. This time not to dissuade but to give him the complete liberty to follow the line of action he had chosen. When he could not be dissuaded, the parents thought, it was better to help him with their prayers and blessings in the

noble path he had taken to. Sarat Chandra was glad beyond measure. He thought that the blessings and good wishes of his parents were a shield and protection against all difficulties of monastic life.

At Baranagore they all passed strenuous days devoting themselves to hard Tapasya. Consideration of food and drink was nothing, the thought of realising the Highest Beatitude was everything with these young monks. The whole day and even long parts of the night would be spent in study, meditation or discussion about spiritual matters. Now and then when it was dead of night Narendra Nath and Sarat Chandra would secretly go out to the place where the body of Sri Ramakrishna was cremated, or to some such spot, and practise meditation. They would come back before others woke up from sleep. Sometimes they would spend the whole night in spiritual practices. Narendra Nath often spoke highly of Sarat's meditation and spiritual fervour. At times Sarat Chandra would go to Dakshineswar and sitting under the Panchavati, where Sri Ramakrishna had so many spiritual experiences, practised Sadhana.

Though so much inclined towards meditative life Sarat Chandra was ever ready to respond to the call of work. Sweeping the rooms, cleansing dishes and utensils, preparing food—in all these works Sarat Chandra was in the forefront. And with his innate spirit of service he was sure to be found near the sick-bed if any of the Gurubhais fell ill.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Sarat Chandra had a good musical voice. Under the guidance of Narendra Nath he further developed the art of singing. His voice was so sweet that from a distance his songs would be mistaken as being sung by a lady. This fact led to an interesting incident in the monastery. One night Sarat Chandra was singing. This created a curiosity in the mind of some neighbours as to how a female voice could be heard from a monastery at such an hour. Led by suspicion they scaled the walls and came to the hall where songs were going on. When they saw what a devotional atmosphere was created there by the singing of a young monk, they felt ashamed of their suspicion and one actually apologised.

With such a good voice, when Sarat Chandra would recite Sanskrit hymns or read the *Chandi* with his faultless pronunciation, the bystanders would feel lifted up to a higher plane of existence. Afterwards, even in advanced age, when, on the occasion of the birthday of Sri Ramakrishna or Swami Vivekananda, he would sing one or two songs out of overflowing love and devotion, those who had the privilege of listening to him would feel a sort of ecstatic joy.

When the young disciples ceremonially took the vow of Sannyasa, after performing the sacred Viraja Homa, and changed their family names, Sarat Chandra became Swami Saradananda. We do not know whether there is any special significance in the name he took, but, as we shall afterwards see, his devotion and service to the

SWAMI SARADANANDA

Holy Mother—whose name was Saradamani—was unique.

Soon the monks began to feel the longing for a life of complete freedom—to wander from one sacred place to another and to practise Tapasya wherever the place would be suitable, all alone, depending on God and God only for help, support and protection. They wanted to test their faith in God by forsaking the shelter of even the Baranagore monastery. So Saradananda went to Puri and practised Tapasya at various places for some months. After returning to Baranagore he started on pilgrimage—this time towards Northern India.

He visited Benares, Ayodhya and came to Rishikesh *via* Hardwar. At Rishikesh he passed some months in Tapasya—depending for his food on Bhiksha (alms given to monks). He greatly enjoyed the life at Rishikesh—the place was so suitable for spiritual practices. In the summer of 1890 with Swami Turiyananda and another Gurubhai he started for Kedarnath and Badrinarayan *via* Gangotri. This pilgrimage was full of thrilling experiences for them. Some days they had to go without food, some days without shelter. There were occasions when their very life was in risk. But Swami Saradananda was calm under all circumstances. Even on such a difficult journey he was not slow in doing acts of utmost sacrifice. It is said that once on the way they were climbing a very steep hill. The two Gurubhais were ahead, Swami Saradananda was behind. They had each a

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

stick in their hands with which they could somehow manage to keep their balance. The climb was so dangerous that to lose foothold meant sure death. As Swami Saradananda was going up slowly, he found a party coming behind in which there was an old woman. She found it hard to climb as she was without a stick. Swami Saradananda quietly handed his stick to the old lady—following the historic example, “Thy need is greater than mine.” Afterwards only by much questioning could his Gurubhais elicit from Swami Saradananda what had happened to his stick. When they heard of the incident, they were struck dumb. Such a sacrifice when life itself was in danger!

Swami Saradananda had been fascinated by the solemn grandeur of Kedar but they could not stay there more than a night because of the extreme cold. But it had been a moon-lit night. Swami Saradananda came out at dead of night once to see the beauty around. What he saw was beyond description. He wrote in a letter, “As soon as I came out, I met with a wonderful sight. The surrounding peaks seemed flooded with silvery moonlight. The snow ranges threw bright reflections of light....There was dead silence all round—not a breath of sound could be heard except the heavy rush of the waters of the holy Mandakini flowing near by. I have never seen such a beautiful but terrible place.” He had wanted to pass some time in Tapasya at Badrinarayan, but had had to return after a stay of few days, as he was to follow the programme of the party.

SWAMI SARADANANDA

After visiting Kedarnath, Tunganath and Badrinarayan, Swami Saradananda came to Almora in July, 1890, and became the guest of Lala Badrinath Sha, a devotee whose house always remained open for the children of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Saradananda wrote to Swami Vivekananda and Swami Akhandananda to meet him at Almora. As a matter of fact he was waiting for them since it could not be known when they would meet as they were then itinerant monks. Towards August, 1890, the Swamis came to Almora, and the three together started for Garhwal. During this time Swami Vivekananda proposed that they should keep their whereabouts secret from their friends. So none would write letters. After seeing various places in the Garhwal State, as they arrived at Tehri, the capital of the State, Swami Akhandananda fell ill. As there was no good doctor there, he was taken to Dehra Dun by his two Gurubhais. On the way, at Rajpur near Mussoorie, they met Swami Turiyananda unexpectedly. Swami Turiyananda had separated from Swami Saradananda on the way to Kedarnath and come here for Tapasya. It was such a pleasant surprise to meet him again. When Swami Akhandananda was a bit better, he was sent to Allahabad, and Swamis Vivekananda, Turiyananda and Saradananda went to Rishikesh. There Swami Vivekananda left the party to wander alone. While staying at Rishikesh Swami Saradananda heard that Swami Brahmananda was practising Tapasya at Kankhal near

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Hardwar. Swamis Saradananda and Turiyananda went to Kankhal to meet him there. Swami Brahmananda was the spiritual child of Sri Ramakrishna. He was always held in high esteem and love by all the children of Sri Ramakrishna. So they were glad beyond measure to see him again. Here they learned that Swami Vivekananda was at Meerut. The party went to Meerut to have the pleasure of seeing their leader. At Meerut they all lived together for a few months before they came to Delhi. At Delhi Swami Vivekananda left them again to wander alone. After this, for a period, Swami Vivekananda practically remained obscured from his Gurubhais, except for a chance meeting with one or two of them. It was only after six years that Swami Saradananda met him again, when Swami Vivekananda had become world famous and Swami Saradananda had to go to London at his bidding as a preacher of Vedanta.

From Delhi Swami Saradananda came to Benares visiting holy places like Muttra, Vrindavan, Allahabad, etc., on the way. At Benares Swami Saradananda stayed for some time practising intense meditation.

Here an earnest devotee in search of a Guru, met him and was so much impressed by him that he afterwards took Sannyasa from him. He then became Swami Sachchidananda and was remarkable for his steadfast devotion to Swami Saradananda. In the summer of 1891, Swami Abhedananda met Swami Saradananda at Benares, and the two Gurubhais accompanied

SWAMI SARADANANDA

by the above-mentioned devotee made a ceremonial circuit on foot, as is the practice with orthodox pilgrims, round the sacred area of the city covering about forty square miles. This caused them so much hardship that all the three were attacked with severe fever. Some time after they had recovered from fever Swami Saradananda got blood dysentery, which compelled him to return to the monastery at Baranagore in September, 1891.

At Baranagore with better facilities for medical care, Swami Saradananda completely recovered. Then he started for Jayrambati to see the Holy Mother, who was considered by the children of Sri Ramakrishna to be the visible representation of the Master on earth. At Jayrambati Swami Saradananda had a very happy time—spending the hours in spiritual practices and enjoying the blessed company of the Holy Mother. But he got malaria here and suffered for a long time even after returning to Baranagore.

The monastery at Baranagore was transferred to Alambazar in 1892. As Alambazar was very close to Dakshineswar, the old memories of Dakshineswar days came very strongly to Swami Saradananda, and he passed some time there practising Tapasya at the Panchavati and for his food depending on begging.

PREACHING VEDANTA IN THE WEST

The Brotherhood at Alambazar for a long time knew nothing about their leader Swami Vivekananda. When the news of the success of a Hindu

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

monk reached the shores of India, the young monks thought that it must be he. For who could have so much dynamic spiritual power if not he whom the Master charged with the mission to supply food to the spiritually hungry world? Soon their surmise was confirmed into belief. Letters came from their beloved Naren, who had appeared before the world as Swami Vivekananda. "Naren" had changed his name from place to place during his wandering days in India in order to hide his personality, and Swami Vivekananda was the name which he had assumed last. When his work in the West made headway, Swami Vivekananda was in need of an assistant, and the choice fell upon Swami Saradananda. So when Swami Vivekananda came to London for the second time in 1896, a pleasant surprise greeted him—for Swami Saradananda had already arrived there on the first of April. How great was their joy to meet again after such a long time! Swami Vivekananda learned from him the details about the monastery at Alambazar and his Gurubhais. They were glad now that the mission of the Master was on the way to fulfilment.

Swami Saradananda delivered a few lectures in London, but he was soon sent to New York, where the Vedanta Society had already been established. The sweet and gentle personality of the Swami and his masterly exposition of Hinduism at once drew a large number of Americans to him. Soon after his arrival in America he was invited to be one of the teachers

SWAMI SARADANANDA

at the Greenacre Conference of Comparative Religions, where he began his work with a lecture on Vedanta and classes on the Yoga System. At the close of the Conference, the Swami was invited to lecture in Brooklyn, New York and Boston. At the Brooklyn Ethical Association he lectured on the Ethical Ideals of the Hindus. Everywhere he made friends and won the love and esteem of earnest followers. Swami Vivekananda was greatly delighted to hear of the success of his Gurubhai through newspaper cuttings sent to him. His dignity of bearing, gentle courtesy, the readiness to meet questions of all kinds, and, above all, the spiritual height from which he could talk, won for him a large number of friends, admirers and devotees. Swami Saradananda afterwards settled down in New York to carry on the Vedanta movement in a regular and organised way. There was no doubt that he was making an impression among some of the best people in New York and its environs as the reports of his work at this time testify.

After returning to India Swami Vivekananda started the Society which has since become the present Ramakrishna Mission. For this as well as for organising the monastery at Belur, the Swami wanted an able hand. Swami Saradananda was known for his calm judgment, infinite patience and extremely loving heart—the very qualities needed for organising a new institution. So he was called back—just at a time when he was at the height of usefulness.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Swami Saradananda sailed on January 12, 1898, and reached Calcutta early in February visiting London, Paris, Rome, etc., on the way. In London he met his old friends, in Paris he was impressed with the artistic aspect in French life, in Rome he saw with great interest the Vatican Library and the sculpture gallery. He also visited the famous St. Peter's Cathedral again. It is said that while visiting it the first time on his way from India to London two years before, he fell into an ecstasy and became oblivious of his surroundings. Does this experience confirm the remark of the Master that he had been a companion of Jesus in a previous incarnation?

THE SECRETARY OF THE RAMAKRISHNA MATH AND MISSION

After his arrival at the Math Swami Saradananda gave himself up to his duties with great devotion. His Western experience with the Indian background of spirituality made him wonderfully fitted for the task. He was soon made the Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, an office which he held for thirty years till his last day.

On his return from America Swami Saradananda gave a series of lectures on the Religion of Vedanta, in Albert Hall, which were highly appreciated by the Calcutta public. He also subsequently gave a series of highly interesting lectures in a conversational style on the Vedas and the Gita, which were very popular. Some of these lectures have since been published in

book form and are remarkable for their lucidity of thought, penetrating vision and spiritual drive. He spoke not so much from the intellect—though their intellectual value was superb—but from the depth of his spiritual realisation; and as such his words were highly inspiring.

The activities of the Swami were manifold, and they began to widen more and more in scope as time rolled on and the organisation grew in importance and extensity. Even when the organisation became so large that its various problems, sometimes of complex nature, were almost beyond the limit of one single hand to tackle, Swami Saradananda stood like a rock—calm and quiet—guiding its destiny with unflinching dependence on the Master. Seeing this, the Holy Mother used to say: “Sarat is holding the Sangha, just as the mythical hydra-headed Vasuki is holding the earth on its hoods.” That this was literally true would not be doubted by anyone who had an intimate knowledge of the activities of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission and the heavy burden Swami Saradananda had to bear. It is said that one day at Dakshineswar Sri Ramakrishna in a state of ecstasy had sat on the lap of young Sarat and said afterwards, “I was testing how much burden he could bear.” Yes, the burden Swami Saradananda bore in his long period of secretaryship was almost superhuman.

In 1899 when plague broke out in Calcutta in an epidemic form, the monks of the Ramakrishna Order organised relief. They not only

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

nursed the sick and the infected without the slightest consideration of personal safety, but also organised sanitation and did much to remove the panic. Of this work, Swami Saradananda bore a great part of the brunt.

After a few months, Swami Saradananda started for Kashmir on receipt of a wire from Swami Vivekananda who was ill there. On the way Swami Saradananda met with an accident which nearly cost him his life. Between Rawalpindi and Srinagar the horse of the coach by which he was travelling suddenly took fright and started down an abyss about four to five thousand feet deep. When the coach reached half the depth it struck against a tree, which gave Swami Saradananda an opportunity to get out. Just then a boulder fell from above and crushed the horse to death. Swami Saradananda thus escaped very miraculously. What was more surprising was that Swami Saradananda did not lose his equanimity even at such a critical hour. When asked as to what he felt at that time he would say that his mind was steady like the compass of a balance and watching dispassionately the whole situation.

Similar calmness had been seen in him when, on his voyage to London, in the Mediterranean his ship had been overtaken by a cyclone. Everybody in the ship was restless, running up and down in despair of life. Many gave vent to their fear in cries. But Swami Saradananda was the silent spectator of the whole scene—so calm and so detached!

SWAMI SARADANANDA

On another occasion he was crossing the Ganges in a country-boat on his way from Calcutta to Belur. A devotee also accompanied him. A severe gale arose and the boat was almost sinking amidst dashing waves. But Swami Saradananda was calmly smoking a *hookah*. This calmness so much exasperated the devotee that he threw the pipe into the Ganges. To this not very unpardonable fury of the devotee he answered only with a kindly smile.

No wonder that with such an almost super-human strength of mind the Swami could do the onerous duties of the Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission for long years without the thought of rest or leave and without the least complaint or murmur. When anybody would come to him with a problem which defied all human solution, the most he would say was, "The Master will set everything right. Be at rest." It was this implicit faith in the ultimate goodness of the Divine Will that was the secret of his equanimity of mind under all circumstances.

After he had met Swami Vivekananda in Srinagar, he made all arrangements for his medical care. When the Swami felt a little better, he was sent to Calcutta *via* Lahore, and Swami Saradananda became the guide of some Western disciples in their pilgrimage to a number of sacred places before he returned to the Math.

Swami Saradananda along with Swami Turiyananda started for Gujrat in February, 1899, for

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

preaching and collecting funds for the Math. They started on February 7, and visiting Cawnpore, Agra, Jeypore, Ahmedabad, Limbdi, Junagad, Bhavnagar, etc., returned to the Math in early May on receiving a wire from Swami Vivekananda who planned to start for the West again. In this tour the Swami had to lecture both in English and Hindi. About one of his lectures in Kathiawar, an eyewitness says: "The Swami Saradananda's lecture on 'The Essence of the Vedas' made a deep impression upon all the people of Bhavnagar, Kathiawar.... His noble figure, his majestic voice, the fire and grandeur of his eloquence, gave him a power to inculcate into the minds of his audience the Vedanta doctrine far better than any other teacher of Vedantism I have known."

After Swami Vivekananda had sailed for the West, greater responsibility fell on the shoulders of Swami Saradananda as regards the work of the organisation. He now devoted greater attention to the training of young monks and novitiates and was particular that they should get sufficient facility for study and spiritual practices. At this time he introduced the system that there should be vigil the whole night in the shrine—one or other monk should be constantly there in meditation and prayer. In this matter he himself led the way. He introduced other methods also for building up the spiritual life of young aspirants. He himself at this period would occasionally make Japa from sunrise to sunset.

There was call from different directions on the

SWAMI SARADANANDA

time and energy of the Swami. He had to go out to lecture, to hold *conversazione*, to attend to correspondence and organise the growing activities of the Mission. But never in his whole life was he found wanting when there was the call of duty. Outwardly he was calm, quiet and very taciturn, but within him was an unfailing dynamo of energy, as it were.

In December of this year he went on pressing invitation to Dacca, Narayangunge and Barisal. In both places his presence created a great stir. In Barisal he stayed for eight days. Here he delivered three public lectures, but day and night he had to talk with crowds of eager souls who would come to him to solve their spiritual problems. His lectures were attended by overwhelming crowds, and created a great spiritual enthusiasm in the whole town. Srijiut Aswini Kumar Datta, the great devotee and leader of Barisal, was beside himself with joy to have a Gurubhai of Swami Vivekananda and a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna in his town. Aswini Kumar had come in personal touch with the Master and his chief disciple; so when he found Swami Saradananda near, he was engaged in unending talks with him. It was at the house of Aswini Kumar that Swami Saradananda spent most of his time receiving visitors and discussing various problems with them. The influence of the enthusiasm created in the minds of the devotees by the visit of Swami Saradananda lasted for a long time. He returned to the Math at Belur in January, 1900.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

At this period Swami Saradananda felt interested in Tantrikism. He wanted to practise the Tantrika form of Sadhana. There was a great opportunity also for that. Ishwar Chandra Chakravarty, father of Sasi and uncle of Swami Saradananda, was a great Tantrika Sadhaka with a degree of actual realisation in that line. Swami Saradananda under his guidance, performed the Tantrika ceremony known as Purnabhisheka, and became engaged in the spiritual practices prescribed in the Tantra literature. Born in an orthodox Brahmin family, himself an adept in ritualisms, Swami Saradananda now devoted himself heart and soul to Tantrika practices. That a soul like the Swami should make rapid progress in any form of Sadhana is without any doubt. The goal of Tantrika Sadhana is the realisation of the Divine Mother in all. That he succeeded in realising it can be guessed from what he wrote in the dedication of his beautiful Bengali book—*Bharate Shakti Puja* (Mother Worship in India). He writes: "The book is dedicated with great devotion to those by whose grace the author has been blessed with the realisation of the special manifestation of the Divine Mother in every woman on earth." The book is the outcome not only of his clear thinking, but also of his direct realisation. That such an abstruse theme could be written in such a popular style indicates his great mastery of the subject.

Swami Vivekananda returned unexpectedly to Belur in December, 1900, after his second visit

SWAMI SARADANANDA

to the West. He was greatly pleased to see the way in which the Math and Mission were being managed, and spoke very highly of the organising ability of Swami Saradananda.

Swami Vivekananda on returning to India this time was not keeping very well. Partly due to this and partly perhaps due to the fact that he wanted to see his work progress as much as possible during his lifetime, he was now and then very severe in his dealings. During such moods even his Gurubhais, including those for whom he had the highest love and respect, would not dare approach him. But Swami Saradananda was the only exception. His deep calmness could freeze anybody's anger and his mind would remain unruffled under any situation. Seeing this trait in him, Swami Vivekananda used to say jocosely, "Sarat's is the blood of a fish, it will never warm up." Many instances are told as regards the great self-control of Swami Saradananda. Once while the monastery was still at Alambazar, Swami Saradananda went to the shrine and found that this so sacred place had been made dirty by the footprints of the cook. This was almost sacrilegious and beyond what even Swami Saradananda could stand. He very sharply called the cook to him. The poor man came trembling with fear to face, as he thought, an outburst. But immediately the Swami took possession of himself and said, "No, there is nothing, you may go." The patience and power of forgiveness of Swami Saradananda were limitless. There were many instances in which the

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Swami brought round a recalcitrant only by his love and tolerance. Around him lived persons, doing useful work, who were unmanageable anywhere else. Swami Saradananda believed in the infinite potentiality and possibility of every soul, and his belief was unshakable. That was the reason why he would remain absolutely indifferent to the apparent fault or weakness of a person.

Swami Vivekananda passed away in July, 1902. The passing away of the leader was a great blow to his Gurubhais. Ever since the Mahasamadhi of the Master, they had all implicitly followed the lead of beloved Naren. Now they were helpless and hopelessly bewildered. Nobody knew what would be the future of the organisation he had started. But the work for which he had so greatly laboured and died must be continued as a token of love and respect to him. Swami Brahmananda as the President and Swami Saradananda as the Secretary shouldered the increased responsibility—now that the leader was no more in physical body—with calm resignation and firm faith in the mission of the Master; and both of them continued these functions till their dying moments. Both of them nurtured the infant institution with their heart's blood, as it were, and the public see in the present Ramakrishna Math and Mission, the monumental expression of the love of these two great souls to their leader. Swami Brahmananda was so much respected by his Gurubhais, that the very idea that anybody else should become President

SWAMI SARADANANDA

during his lifetime seemed nothing short of sacrilegious to them. And after the passing away of Swami Brahmananda, when there was a proposal of making Swami Saradananda President, he rejected it on the ground that the beloved leader had made him the Secretary while he was alive and so he must continue in that duty.

After the passing away of the leader Swami Saradananda, having so much devotion to Swami Vivekananda and his cause, began to work with greater earnestness and love. From Swami Brahmananda would come the guidance and inspiration, and it was Swami Saradananda who would bear the brunt of day-to-day work. Wherever there was any difficulty, he was sure to put his shoulder to the wheel. Hard labour, the strain of meeting difficult situations, the worry of having added responsibility—nothing could daunt this strong spirit. Yet outwardly there was not the slightest indication that he had any difficult time. The Himalayan calmness of his soul no storm could ruffle.

Swami Turiyananda, who was working in San Francisco, on hearing of the illness of Swami Vivekananda, had started for India. So immediately after the passing away of Swami Vivekananda, Swami Trigunatita was sent to America. He had been doing very good work as Editor, manager and organiser of the *Udbodhan*, a Bengali magazine started under the inspiration of Swami Vivekananda. After the Swami had left the work, the magazine was in a critical condition—financially and otherwise. Some even

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

made the proposal to do away with the magazine. But Swami Saradananda came forward and personally took up the whole responsibility. He would write articles for it, try to raise subscriptions and donations for it and supervise the whole management. Gradually the financial condition of the magazine improved, the paper increased in popularity, and some funds also accumulated as surplus.

Now the Swami thought that the *Udbodhan* should have a house of its own. There was need also for a house for the Holy Mother to stay in when she came to Calcutta. So the Swami planned to build a house where downstairs there should be the Udbodhan Office, and upstairs would be the shrine and the residence of the Holy Mother. Specially the second reason so much appealed to the Swami, that he started the work by borrowing money on his personal responsibility in spite of strong opposition from many quarters.

This was a blessing in disguise. To repay the loan Swami Saradananda began to write *Sri Ramakrishna Lila Prasanga*—life of the Master—which has become a classic in Bengali literature. Through this book, the reading public get an authentic and critical biography of Sri Ramakrishna. The book is sublime in diction, highly elevating in thought, very rational in outlook and extremely critical in arriving at facts. The book forms a class by itself and has achieved a supreme task—that of translating the superconscious into the language of the conscious. One

wonders that the Bengali language had so much potentiality ! The book is not only a biography, but it has been supplying spiritual sustenance to thousands of readers.

Yet, for this great achievement the Swami would not accept the least credit. He would say that the Master had made him the instrument to write this book. The book is in five parts, but still incomplete. When hard pressed to complete the book, the Swami would only say with his usual economy of words, "If the Master wills, he will have it done." He himself was perfectly passive in the matter.

One's admiration for the Swami increases a thousandfold, if one knows the circumstances under which such an important book was written. The house in which he lived was crowded. The Holy Mother was staying upstairs, and there was a stream of devotees coming at all hours of the day. There was the exacting duty of the secretaryship of the Ramakrishna Mission, and for this also he had to receive people and give audience. Under such a situation the Swami would be found absorbed writing this book—giving a shape to his love and devotion to the Master and the Holy Mother in black and white—oblivious of the surroundings or any other thing in the world. And so methodical he was ! Even under such distracting circumstances, he was an example of method and orderliness. There was no rush and hurry about him. Everything must be done with proper care, and in the most perfect way. Nothing was a trifle with him.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Every act was worship. To watch him was to know how every act could be transformed into worship—literally as it were. Not a breath he would take without knowing that it was a worship of the Most High.

The "Udbodhan Office" was removed to the new building towards the end of 1908 and the Holy Mother first came to this house on May 23, 1909. And what was his joy when the Mother came and stayed at the house! The devotion of Swami Saradananda to the Holy Mother was wonderful. Her word was more than law to him—it was the Divine Mother's command, and there was nothing which he could not do to fulfil her least wish. To him she was actually the manifestation of the Divine Mother in human form, and he would make no distinction between her and the Master. He could conceive of no better worship than to serve her with whole-souled devotion. Such was his devotion to her that anyone coming from her village home received the utmost consideration from him. Even a dog of Jayrambati, the birth-place of the Holy Mother, was a privileged being in his consideration. Sometimes people would take advantage of this attitude of the Swami, and he would have to pay very heavily for this—but he saw everything in a different light.

In 1909 a situation arose which showed how courageous this quiet-looking Swami was. Two of those accused in the Manicktola Bomb Case—Devavrata Bose and Sachindra Nath Sen—came to join the Ramakrishna Order giving up their

SWAMI SARADANANDA

political activities. Both of them were known as firebrand revolutionaries. To accept them was to invite the wrath of the police and the Government. But to refuse admission to a sincere spiritual aspirant, simply because of his past conduct, was a sheer act of cowardice. Swami Saradananda accepted them and some other young men—political suspects—as members of the Order—though there was strong opposition from all sides. For this action the Swami had to face considerable difficulty too. But the Swami saw the Police Chief and other high officials in Calcutta and stood guarantee for these young men. Devavrata afterwards worked as a successful Editor of the *Udbodhan* for three years and as President of the Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, for six years before he died in 1918. But for the bold protection given by the Swami, the life of these young men would perhaps have taken a different direction.

Similar trouble on political grounds occurred some years later. In the Administration Report of the Government of Bengal there was the insinuation that the writings of Swami Vivekananda were the source of inspiration behind the revolutionary activities in Bengal. Following close upon this publication, Lord Carmichael, the then Governor of Bengal, in his durbar speech at Dacca in 1916 made some remarks with reference to the Ramakrishna Mission, which had disastrous effect on its activities. A great panic prevailed about the future of the Mission. At this time Swami Brahmananda was away in

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

South India, so Swami Saradananda had to bear the main brunt. Though indisposed at that time, he submitted a memorial to the Government, saw the Governor and other high officials and removed all misconception from their minds about the Mission activities. As a result of this Lord Carmichael wrote a letter to the Swami in which among other things he said: "I read with great interest the memorial which the Mission authorities submitted to me some time ago. I regret very much to hear that words used by me at the durbar in December last regarding the Mission should have led in any way to the curtailment of the good religious, social and educational work the Mission has done and is doing. As you I know realise, my object was not to condemn the Ramakrishna Mission and its members. I know the character of the Mission's work is entirely non-political, and I have heard nothing but good of its work of social service for the people."

Henceforward the police did not give any trouble even to those political suspects who had joined the Order.

However much he might try to ignore it, Swami Saradananda was passing through a great strain. As a result he was not keeping well. Amongst other things he got rheumatism, for which the doctors advised a change at Puri where sea bathing would do him good. The Swami went to Puri in March, 1913, and returned in July. There also he did not stop his regular work. Throughout his stay at Puri he made it a rule to go to the temple of Jagannath every morning. During

SWAMI SARADANANDA

the Car Festival it was a sight for the gods to see a fat person like the Swami holding the rope of the Car and pulling it with such great enthusiasm and perhaps the highest devotion.

At Puri an incident happened which indicated the inborn courtesy and dignity of the Swami. Swami Saradananda with his party put up at "Sasi-niketan," a house belonging to the great devotee, the late Balaram Bose. One evening, the Swami on returning to the house after his evening walk, found it had been taken possession of by the Raja of Bundi. This was due to the mistake of a priest-guide of the temple. The Swami could easily have asked the Raja to vacate the house. But to save the Raja as well as the guide from embarrassment the Swami agreed to remove to another house temporarily. Not knowing the real situation, the Private Secretary of the Raja at first showed some *hauteur*. But the reply and attitude of the Swami so much overpowered him, that he soon took the dust of the feet of the Swami as a mark of respect and veneration.

In 1913 there was a great flood in Burdwan. The Ramakrishna Mission started relief. Whenever there was flood or famine the Swami would take personal interest in the relief operation. He would make arrangement for raising funds and see that proper workers went to the field for work. For this he had to face considerable difficulties now and then, but difficulty had no terror for the Swami. This relief lasted for many months.

The next year the Swami was attacked with

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

some kidney troubles. The pain was severe, but he bore that with wonderful fortitude. At that time the Holy Mother stayed upstairs. Lest she should become worried, the Swami would hardly give out that he had been suffering from any pain. Fortunately after a few days he came round.

In 1916 the Swami went on a pilgrimage to Gaya, Benares, Vrindavan, Muttra and Allahabad and returned to Calcutta in May after an absence of two months.

In 1917 Swami Premananda, the beloved disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, fell ill of Kala-Azar. He stayed at the house of Balaram Bose in Calcutta, and Swami Saradananda supervised all arrangements that were made for his treatment. Soon he had to rush to Puri, because Swami Turiyananda, another of his brother-disciples, was seriously ill there. Whenever anybody in the Math would be ill, Swami Saradananda was sure to be by his bedside. If he could not make time to attend the case personally, he would make all arrangements for his treatment. But if any emergency would arise, the Swami was the person to meet that. A patient does not like to take injection, Swami Saradananda would go there. Sometimes at his very presence the patient would change his mind. A patient was clamouring for a food which would be injurious for him, the Swami, in words of extreme love and sympathy, would say he would get the food he wanted, but after some days. The patient like a child would agree. There were instances when even in his busy life he passed

SWAMI SARADANANDA

the whole night by sick-bed when the patient was difficult to manage. He might be an elderly Sannyasin, he might be a young Brahma-charin, Swami Saradananda was equally anxious for all in times of illness. Nay, his sympathy was not limited to the members of the Order alone. Sometimes he would go on night duty to the houses of devotees. Once a devotee fell ill of smallpox and was lying uncared for in a cottage on the Ganges. When the Swami heard of this he immediately went there and after careful nursing for a few days cured the patient. Once a pthisis patient in the house of a devotee needed attendance. Swami Saradananda went there and with utmost sympathy attended the case.

When he became old, he could not personally attend the patients. But the same love and sympathy were there. He would not hesitate in the least even to risk his life in such cases. Once in his old days when he could not go out except by car, Swami Saradananda walked out alone at noon. Feeling anxious as to where he could go and at such an odd hour, his attendant followed him. Soon he attracted the notice of the Swami, who at first asked him not to come, but at the latter's earnest appeal allowed him to follow. The Swami went to a hotel and entering a room upstairs sat by the side of a patient. It was not difficult for the Swami's attendant to understand that it was a case of pthisis, and that the patient was on his death-bed. The Swami began to caress the patient lovingly, talking all the while in words of greatest sympathy. The

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

patient was careless—as he talked sputum fell on all sides. Now he got up, cut some fruits and offered them to the Swami. He was not accustomed to take anything at that hour, so he refused. But as the patient insisted, the Swami ate those fruits unhesitatingly. As the attendant watched the whole scene, he was shuddering lest the Swami should catch the infection. While returning, the attendant took the liberty of blaming the Swami for eating there and under such circumstances. The Swami at first remained quiet, and afterwards said, “The Master used to say, it will not do you any harm if you take food offered with love and devotion.” The attendant did not fail to perceive that the real fact was, the Swami was so sensitive lest he should wound the feelings of a dying patient.

In the month of February, 1920, Swami Saradananda had learnt that the Holy Mother was seriously ill at Jayrambati. Immediately he made all arrangements to bring her to Calcutta. For five months she was kept at the Udbodhan House, and Swami Saradananda did all that was humanly possible for her recovery. The best doctors were called in, the best attendants were engaged, every medical advice was followed with scrupulous care. And day and night went the earnest prayer from his devoted heart to Heaven for her recovery. A man of supreme self-possession and self-control—one who could control his feelings to the amazement of all—Swami Saradananda now betrayed his constant anxiety like a helpless child. But nothing could

SWAMI SARADANANDA

avert the inevitable—divine dispensation prevailed against human efforts. The Mother passed away from the physical arena of activities after a protracted illness of six months.

Two years later there came the turn of another—that of Swami Brahmananda. Swami Brahmananda, who had been the President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission and held such a unique position in the Order commanding not only love but also unparalleled respect even from his Gurubhais, passed away. This was a shock which unnerved Swami Saradananda completely. Swami Saradananda had worked as the chief executive, but in times of difficulty the source of all guidance and inspiration had been Swami Brahmananda. He was not to all appearances in active work, but he was the moving spirit behind all activities in the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. So, shortly after the passing away of the Holy Mother, when Swami Brahmananda also entered into Mahasamadhi, Swami Saradananda was altogether broken in heart.

There were other deaths too. Gurubhais were passing away one by one, devotees were being called away to the Master by turns. The Swami began to feel lonely in this world. He lost all zest for work. Gradually he began to withdraw his mind from work and to devote greater and greater time to meditation. Those who watched him could easily see that he was preparing for the final exit. During the last few years he would spend long hours in meditation, and in regard to work, giving only directions.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

At this time one task which received his most serious attention was the construction of a temple at Jayrambati in sacred memory of the Holy Mother. He would supply money and supervising hands for the work and keep himself acquainted with the minutest details of the construction. He would openly say that after the completion of the temple he would retire from all work. The beautiful temple—emblem of Swami Saradananda's devotion to the Holy Mother—was dedicated on April 19, 1923. What was the joy of the Swami on that day! A very large number of monks and devotees assembled at Jayrambati and the little village was humming with new life. There was an air of festivity all round. Swami Saradananda supervised every detail of the celebration. A large number of persons were fed every day. Worship was done with punctilious care. Everybody felt, as it were, the living presence of the Holy Mother in that round of joy and festivity. Swami Saradananda became like a Kalpataru. He not only supplied the materials for this celebration but, after the dedication ceremony was over, he also began to give spiritual initiation to whoever came. To-day he made no distinction between the deserving and the undeserving. He was ready to give himself away fully. When somebody reasoned with him that it might be too great a strain for his health, as he was giving initiation till late in the day, the Swami showed the utmost displeasure. To-day he must give all he had.

Another very important work which the Swami

did and which will go down to history was the holding of the Ramakrishna Mission Convention at Belur Math in 1926. It was mainly a meeting of the monks of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission centres—about one hundred in number, sprinkled over the whole of India as well as outside India—in order to compare notes and devise future plan of work. Though not keeping very well he took great interest in it and worked very hard to make it a success.

Perhaps he wanted to see that the institution for which he had spent his whole life was on a firm basis before he took final leave from the world. In the Address of Welcome that he delivered at the first session of the Convention he surveyed the past of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission in a sweep, very frankly depicted the present position and warned the members against the dangers and pitfalls that were lurking in the future. Every new movement passes through three stages—opposition, acceptance and decline. There is great opposition when a new movement is started. If it has the strength to stand the opposition, the public accepts it and showers praise and admiration. Then comes the real danger for the movement. For the members are prone to relax their efforts and be off their guard. "For, security brings a relaxation of spirits and energy, and a sudden growth of extensivity quickly lessens the intensity and unity of purpose that were found among the promoters of the movement." The whole speech was full of fire and vigour. It was like a veteran General's

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

charge to his present army and future unknown soldiers.

“Yea, the Master and His chosen leader have done wonderful work to help poor India and other more fortunate countries through you! But still greater works remain yet to be accomplished, and the Master and the Swami will do it all in time, even through you, if you keep close to their purity and singleness of purpose, their sacrifice and self-surrender for all that is good, true and noble, and follow their footsteps with that meek and humble spirit with which you have followed them. For, if we come forward to do their work in any other spirit and think too much of ourselves because we have been chosen and allowed to do their work thus far, we shall find to our great regret that we have been hopelessly rejected and that others have been chosen instead to take our places. Aye, remember the fate of the ‘Chosen Israel,’ when thinking themselves secure in their vanity and self-conceit they heeded not the Master and His warning that ‘The Lord can raise His Chosen people from stocks and stones.’ Remember also the records of history about the fate of some of our once powerful sects in India.

“Therefore, wonderful as it is to think of the wide extension that our Mission has attained in the past quarter of a century, it requires us to consider seriously the question, whether or not we have gained this at the cost of that intense spirit of sacrifice and love for the Ideal, which inspired us at the beginning—whether or not the

SWAMI SARADANANDA

work that we did at first, for the love and glory of the Ideal, has turned into slavery and bondage, through undue attachment on our part to name, fame, power and position. Yes, the time is ripe for consideration and settlement of such momentous questions—for the separation of husks from the grains, of dross from the pure metal.

“The present Convention gives you the opportunity. It affords you the rare privilege of meeting many of your senior co-workers and elders to profit by their experiences, of discussing and settling future plans of work with them for the welfare of the Mission as a whole, and for warding off the dangers and evils that threaten to overtake all institutions at this critical stage of their acceptance by the public. Join it with all sincerity and openness with a view to make a thorough and sifting inquiry of the whole work to find out if we have swerved from our glorious Ideal in our struggle to keep up to the demands of this unique extension. Hold fast to the Ideal, for the Ideal has in it the stored up energy, the Kundalini behind every movement—and judge yourselves and others by its effulgent light.”

In this fiery message—his invaluable legacy to the Order, he did, as it were, the self-examination for the whole Mission.

As it was physically impossible for the Swami to cope with the demands of the growing organisation single-handed, at the end of the Convention he appointed a Working Committee which should deal with day-to-day works.

After the Convention the Swami virtually

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

retired from active work, devoting more and more time to meditation. One who for so long had thought of the minutest details of the far-flung organisation, had planned for sending speedy relief to wherever there was epidemic or flood or famine or any calamity, would now be found self-absorbed—his mind indrawn. With his ill health, finding him devoted so much to meditation and spiritual practices, the doctors got alarmed and raised objections. And after all what was the necessity of any further spiritual practices for a soul like Swami Saradananda! But to all protestations the Swami would give simply a loving smile.

Swami Saradananda's health was getting worse and worse. But such was his consideration for others that he would hardly give out all he was suffering. He gave strict instructions to his attendants that they should not give information about his health to others, lest they should get worried and anxious. He had been suffering from various ailments. But nobody knew that the end was so near.

It was Saturday, August 6, 1927. Swami Saradananda as usual sat in his meditation early in the morning. Generally he would be meditating till past noon. But to-day he got up earlier and went to the shrine. He remained in the shrine for about twenty-five minutes—an unusually long period. He went inside the shrine and after a short period returned to the door. Again he entered, stood for a few moments near the portrait of the Holy Mother and returned.

SWAMI SARADANANDA

These he did several times. When he finally came out, a great serenity shone through his face. He followed his other routines of the day as usual. In the evening when Aratrika (the Evening Service) was going on in the shrine, he remained absorbed in thought in his own room. After the Aratrika was over, he raised both his hands in a bowing posture. After that an attendant came with some papers. As the Swami stood up to put them inside a chest of drawers, he felt uneasy, his head reeled, as it were. He asked the attendant to prepare some medicine and instructed him to keep the news secret lest it should create unnecessary alarm. These were the last words he spoke, and he lay down on the bed.

It was a case of apoplexy. Many doctors were called in. Different kinds of treatment were tried. But he did not regain his normal consciousness. The Udbodhan House was day and night crowded with monks, devotees and admirers, with anxious look and worried appearance. From different parts of India monks and devotees began to pour into Calcutta and thronged at that house to have a last look at the Swami. The Swami passed away at two in the morning of August 19. A pillar of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission was gone and a great luminary became invisible to mortal eyes.

PERSONAL TRAITS

Swami Saradananda was the living embodiment of the ideal of the Gita in the modern age.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

To see him was to know how ■ man can be "Sthitaprajna"—steadfast in wisdom—as taught in the Gita. He was alike in heat and cold, praise and blame, nay, his life was tuned to such a high level that he was beyond the reach of such things. In him was exemplified the Gita-illustration of the ocean which remains unaffected by any amount of water flowing into or from it. He was just as undisturbed by material things as that. In spite of all his activities, one could tangibly see that his was the case of ■ Yogi "whose happiness is within, whose relaxation is within, and whose light is within."

He harmonised in his life Jnana, Karma, Bhakti and Yoga, and it was difficult to find out which was less predominant in him. Every one of these four paths reached the highest perfection in him, as it were. As a Karma-Yogi he was unparalleled. When he would go to the temple of Vishwanath at Benares and with a prayerful look touch the Image, or when at Puri, throbbing with emotion, he would be looking at Jagannath, bystanders could not turn their eyes away from him and even a hard-boiled unbeliever, seeing those scenes, would catch some spirit of devotion from him. In discussing religious matters with him, one would find him so very rational in outlook, that one would feel drawn to him in spite of oneself. About the intricacies of the workings of the mind and the experiences in meditation he would talk with such a clear grasp that the questioner would feel that here was one who was talking from direct realisation, and with one or

SWAMI SARADANANDA

two words from him all his doubts and difficulties would vanish.

We find Swami Saradananda mainly in two rôles—as the Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission and as a spiritual personality.

As the Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission he falsified the current belief that Indians lack the power of organisation. When death snatched away Swami Saradananda there was a network of Ramakrishna Math and Mission centres and associate branches throughout the length and breadth of India, and there were many centres abroad. Yet, it was the work of only thirty years. Besides the regular work of these centres, every year there were organised relief works in which thousands of persons would partake. And all these were done with scrupulous care and almost religious perfection.

One wonders what was the secret of this? Well, Swami Saradananda's personality worked all this miracle. He was so much in the love and esteem of the workers that his slightest desire was fulfilled with utmost veneration. And this love and esteem was the effect of the Swami's extreme solicitude for their welfare and his unreserved confidence in them. It was very difficult to prejudice him against anybody. And his confidence and trust were never betrayed. He was very democratic in attitude and always kept an open mind. Even to the words of a boy he would listen with great attention and patience. When at any time he found that he had committed a mistake, he would not hesitate to

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

acknowledge it immediately. Once he took a young monk to task for a supposed fault. Afterwards when the Swami knew that the monk was not really at fault, he felt so sorry that he tenderly apologised. This incident, showing the magnanimity of the Swami, created a sensation in the Mission. Though wielding so much power, he had not the slightest love of power in him. He was humility itself. He felt that anyone might know better than he. He considered himself simply an instrument in the hands of the Master and a servant of the leader—Swami Vivekananda. His idea was that everyone was striving after Ultimate Freedom, and that that hankering expressed itself in the love of freedom in daily actions. So the Swami would disturb the freedom of individuals as little as possible. Above all, his own example of doing things with religious devotion and without the slightest trace of egotism gave inspiration to others to do likewise. Once a young monk told him that he did not feel confident enough for the new duty that was given to him. The Swami's reply was: "This is good in one respect. You will not have to work from egotism. You will have to pray to the Lord to make you fit for the task." Behind everything he did or said there was a very prayerful attitude. All these characteristics made his work a stupendous success. His words were obeyed with greater attention than those of any dictator the world has seen, but his was a rule of tender love.

It must not, however, be forgotten that the

SWAMI SARADANANDA

secret of his power and influence was his spiritual personality. It was only because spiritually he belonged to a very, very high plane that he could love one and all so unselfishly, remain unmoved in all circumstances and keep his faith in humanity under all trials. It is difficult to gauge the spiritual depth of a person from outside, especially of a soul like Swami Saradananda who would overpower a person by his very presence. This much we know that hundreds of persons would come and look up to him for spiritual solace when they became weary of the world or torn with conflict and affliction. And whoever came in touch with him could not help being nobler and spiritually richer. There is not the slightest exaggeration in this statement as those who have experienced it will testify. Records in his personal diary show that he had communion with the Divine Mother on many occasions, but more than that people would tangibly feel that here was one whose will was completely identified with the will of God. It was because of this perhaps that one or two words from his lips would remove a heavy burden from many a weary heart. Once an attendant, who felt the touch of his love so much that often he could dare to take liberty with him, asked him what he had attained spiritually. The Swami only replied, "Did we cut grass¹ at Dakshineswar?" At another time quiet inadvertently he gave out to this attendant that whatever he had written in

¹Means doing nothing.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Sri Ramakrishna Lila Prasanga about spiritual things, he had experienced directly in his own life. And in that book he has at places delineated the highest experiences of spiritual life. To outsiders the only test of a spiritual genius is that he can radiate great peace and blessedness. This the Swami always did to an unusual degree. That is why people would daily flock to the Udbodhan House just to bow to him or even only to see him. After the Holy Mother was no more in physical body, hundreds of women devotees would turn to him for spiritual sustenance. His natural respect for all women as the manifestation of the Divine Mother on earth made him specially fitted for this task.

But with all his spiritual attainment, the Swami was quite modern in outlook. Those who did not believe or had no interest in religion, would find joy in mixing with him as a very cultured man. He was in touch with all modern thoughts and movements. This aspect of his life drew many to him, who would afterwards be gradually struck with his spiritual side.

He had the great capacity to hide any external manifestation of his spiritual powers. Many who did not bother much with spiritual problems found him living like a common human being, though they could not analyse what it was in him that drew them so irresistibly to him.

His playful conduct with children was a sight interesting to enjoy. How he could bring himself down to their level and play jokes and have fun with them to their great delight was an object

SWAMI SARADANANDA

of wonder to many. He became just like a child in the company of children.

His courteous behaviour became proverbial. When in the West, where courtesy has taken the place of religion, as it were, the Swami was highly admired for his refined manners. He lived in the West for a short period only, but afterwards whenever any Westerner came in touch with him, the person would feel quite at home with him and invariably be impressed with his deportment.

His love and sympathy and consideration for all have become a byword in the monastic organization he built up. Instances of his kindness are cherished in memory as a sacred treasure. Himself ever ready to serve others, he would hardly like to take service from anyone. Even when disabled because of age and illness, he would only take the most needed service from his attendants. Apart from physical service, he was so very considerate towards the feelings of others. Thoughtlessness is said to be the worst form of selfishness. Sometimes it is worse than even physical violence. Hardly any word had escaped from his lips during his whole life which could hurt the feelings of others.

These and many other qualities would have made him a power even if he had not taken orders. But in Swami Saradananda, the monk and the disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, these were only added facets of beauty in character. He was a spiritual genius first, and any other thing afterwards. The spiritual side of his life towered

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

above anything else. He was ■ disciple of the Master and the Master's life was reflected in him. He lived, moved and had his being in him. Swami Vivekananda once said to his Gurubhais, "Don't preach the personality of Sri Ramakrishna, just live such a life that it will itself be preaching him." Well, Swami Saradananda lived such a life.



Swami Yogananda



Swami Niranjanananda (P. 126)

III

SWAMI YOGANANDA

At the time when Sri Ramakrishna was attracting devotees—old and young—to the temple-garden at Dakshineswar, a young man in his teens, belonging to a neighbouring family, came to the garden of Rani Rasmani for a few consecutive days to see Sri Ramakrishna. The boy looked younger than his age and was cherubic in appearance. He was of a very religious disposition, and a divine purity beamed through his face. The boy had heard about Sri Ramakrishna and felt interested to see the saint. But he was shy by nature and so could not find out Sri Ramakrishna, though he went to Dakshineswar repeatedly. One day he saw a crowd in a room in the precincts of the temple and thought that that might be the place where Sri Ramakrishna was staying. He went near but stood outside. At this time Sri Ramakrishna asked a man to bring all those who were outside within the room. The man found only a boy and brought him inside and offered him a seat. When the conversation ended and all went away, Sri Ramakrishna came to the boy and very lovingly made inquiries about him.

The name of the boy was Jogindra Nath Choudhury. Sri Ramakrishna was delighted to

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

know that the boy was the son of Nabin Chandra Choudhury, his old acquaintance.

Jogindra belonged to the Choudhury family of Dakshineswar. His ancestors were very aristocratic and prosperous, but his parents had become poor. His father was a very orthodox Brahmin and performed many reiligious festivals. Sri Ramakrishna during the period of his Sadhana had sometimes attended these festivals, and was thus known to the family.

Jogin was born in the year 1861. From his boyhood he was of contemplative temperament. Even while at play with his companions, he would suddenly grow pensive, stop play and look listlessly at the azure sky. He would feel that he did not belong to this earth, that he had come from somewhere in some other plane of existence and that those who were near about him were not really his kith and kin.

He was simple in his habits and never hankered after any luxury. He was a bit reserved and taciturn by nature. This prevented his friends from being very free with him. But he commanded love and even respect from all.

After he was given the sacred thread, he, though very young, spent much time in meditation and worship. While performing worship of the family deity he would now and then become deeply absorbed.

Jogin was about sixteen or seventeen when he met Sri Ramakrishna for the first time. He was then studying for the Entrance Examination. At the very first meeting Sri Ramakrishna recognised

the spiritual potentiality of the boy and advised him to come to him now and then. Jogin was charmed with the warmth and cordiality with which he was received; and he began to repeat his visits to Sri Ramakrishna as often as he could.

To the people of Dakshineswar Sri Ramakrishna was known as an "eccentric Brahmin." They had no idea that the "eccentricity" in the behaviour of Sri Ramakrishna was due to his God-realisation. The orthodox section looked upon Sri Ramakrishna with suspicion in regard to whether he strictly observed caste rules etc. For people from Calcutta flocked round him—the city where in those days many people openly defied the customs and traditions of Hinduism. Therefore, Jogin did not dare come to Sri Ramakrishna freely, for he was afraid there would be objections from his parents if they knew about it. So he began to pay visits to Sri Ramakrishna stealthily.

But love like murder will out. Soon it was known that Jogin was very much devoted to Sri Ramakrishna and spent most of his time with him. Jogin's friends and companions began to taunt and ridicule him for that. Of a quiet nature as he was, he would meet all opposition with a silent smile. His parents were perturbed to see him indifferent to his studies and so much under the influence of Sri Ramakrishna. But they did not like to interfere with him directly as they thought it would be of no avail.

Jogin thought that his continuance of studies was useless for he had no worldly ambition. But

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

just to help his parents, who were in straitened circumstances, he went to Cawnpore in search of some job. He tried for a few months, but could not get any employment. So he devoted his ample leisure to meditation and spiritual practices. He shunned company, and liked to live alone with his thoughts. He spoke as little as possible. His movements and behaviour were unusual. The uncle of Jogin with whom he stayed at Cawnpore, got alarmed lest he go out of his mind. He wrote to the father of Jogin all about him and suggested marriage as the only remedy; for that might create in him an interest in worldly things.

Jogin knew nothing about this. He got information that some one was ill at home, and thinking it might be his mother to whom he was greatly devoted, he hurried to Dakshineswar. But to his great dismay he found that the information he got was wrong—it was simply a pretext to bring him to home, where his marriage was arranged. He was in a great fix. He was against marriage, for that would interfere with his religious life. His great desire was to live a life of renunciation and devote all his time and energy to the realisation of God, but now there was a conspiracy to frustrate his noble resolve.

Jogin was too gentle to be able to resist the wishes of his parents—specially of his mother, and in spite of himself he consented to marry. His parents wrongly thought that marriage would turn the mind of Jogin to worldly things. But the effect was just the reverse. The fact that

his resolve of living a celibate life had been frustrated, weighed so heavily on his mind that he felt miserable over it. He became moody and brooded day and night over his mistake. He did not even like to go to Sri Ramakrishna to whom he was once so attached. No, he would not show his face to Sri Ramakrishna, who had high expectation about his spiritual future and would be sorely disappointed to learn that he had falsified all his hopes by his act of marriage.

The news of all that had happened with regard to his beloved Jogin reached Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna sent information again and again to Jogin to come and see him. But he was reluctant to go. Thereupon Sri Ramakrishna told a friend of Jogin: "Jogin once took some money from me. It is strange that he has not returned the money nor has he given me any account of that!" When Jogin heard of this, his feelings were greatly wounded. He remembered that Sri Ramakrishna had given him a small sum to make some purchases for him before he left for Cawnpore, and a small balance of that remained. But because of his marriage he had felt ashamed to go to Sri Ramakrishna and therefore could not return the balance. At the remarks of Sri Ramakrishna, however, he was so aggrieved that he took the earliest opportunity to return the money and at the same time he thought that it would be his last visit to Sri Ramakrishna.

Sri Ramakrishna was sitting on his cot with his wearing cloth on his lap when Jogin came to

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

see him. Like a child, putting his cloth under his armpit, he ran to receive Jogin as soon as he saw him. Sri Ramakrishna was beside himself with joy at the coming of Jogin. And the first thing he said to him was: "What harm if you have married? Marriage will never be an obstacle to your spiritual life. Hundreds of marriages will never interfere with your spiritual progress if God is gracious. One day bring your wife here. I shall so change her mind that instead of an obstacle she will be a great help to you."

A dead weight was removed, as it were, from Jogin's heart, as he heard Sri Ramakrishna utter these words in an ecstatic mood. He saw light where it had been all darkness for him. He was filled with new hope and encouragement. While taking leave of Sri Ramakrishna, he raised the topic of the balance of the money which he was to return, but to this Sri Ramakrishna was supremely indifferent. He understood that Sri Ramakrishna's remarks about the money had simply been an excuse to bring him to him. Now his love and admiration for Sri Ramakrishna became all the more great, and he began to repeat his visits to Dakshineswar.

Even after marriage Jogin was indifferent to worldly affairs as before. This was a great disappointment to his parents who had thought of binding him to the world through the tie of wedlock. Once the mother of Jogin rebuked him for his growing detachment to the world as unbecoming of one who had a wife to support.

He was greatly shocked. Did he not marry only at the earnest importunity of his mother! From this time on, his aversion for worldly life increased all the more. He thought Sri Ramakrishna was the only person who consistently and most selflessly loved him. And he began to spend greater time with Sri Ramakrishna. The latter also found an opportunity to pay greater attention to the training of Jogin.

We have said Jogin was very soft-natured. It would be difficult for him to hurt even an insect. But sometimes too much gentleness becomes a source of trouble rather than being a virtue. Sri Ramakrishna noticed the softness in the character of Jogin and he wanted to bring this home to his disciple. Sri Ramakrishna once found that there were some cockroaches in his bundle of clothes. He asked Jogin to take those clothes outside the room and kill the cockroaches. He performed the first part of the order and not the second one. He took the clothes outside the room. But as he was too gentle to kill the insects, he simply threw them away and thought Sri Ramakrishna would not perhaps inquire in so much detail. But strangely enough Sri Ramakrishna asked him whether he had killed those cockroaches. When he answered in the negative, Sri Ramakrishna gave him a mild reproof, for not obeying his words in toto.

A similar incident happened on another day. Jogin was going from Calcutta to Dakshineswar by a boat. There were other passengers on the boat. One of them began to criticise Sri

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Ramakrishna as being a hypocrite and so on. Jogin felt hurt at such criticisms, but did not utter even a word of protest. Sri Ramakrishna needed no defence from Jogin: he was tall enough to be above the reach of any criticism of fools—Jogin thought. After coming to Dakshineswar he narrated the incidents to Sri Ramakrishna and thought Sri Ramakrishna would approve of his goodness in not opposing the passengers. But Sri Ramakrishna did just the opposite. He took him to task for pocketing the blasphemy heaped upon his Guru. "A disciple should never hear criticisms hurled against his Guru without protest," said Sri Ramakrishna. "If he cannot protest, he should leave the spot forthwith."

Once Jogin went to the market to make some purchases for Sri Ramakrishna. The cunning shopkeeper feigned to be very religious-minded and Jogin took him to be such. But when he returned to Dakshineswar, he found that the shopkeeper had cheated him. This called for a sharp rebuke from Sri Ramakrishna. "A man may aspire to be religious; but that is no reason why he should be a fool," said Sri Ramakrishna.

Though Jogin would trust a man easily and had the simplicity of a child, he was not a simpleton. Rather he had a keen discriminating mind and was critical in his outlook. What opinion he would give about men and things would often prove true. But his critical attitude once led him into a quandary.

One night he slept in the same room with Sri Ramakrishna. In the dead of night he found

that Sri Ramakrishna was not in the room and the door was open. At first he felt curious, then became suspicious as to where Sri Ramakrishna could go at such an unearthly hour. He came outside, but Sri Ramakrishna could not be seen. Did Sri Ramakrishna then go to his wife, who was then staying at the concert-house?— he thought. Then Sri Ramakrishna was not what he professed himself to be! He wanted to probe into the mystery, and stood near the concert-house to see if Sri Ramakrishna came out of the room. After some time Sri Ramakrishna came from the Panchavati side and was surprised to see him standing near the concert-house. Jogin was stupefied and felt ashamed of himself for his suspicion. *A more sinful act can never be conceived of: to suspect even in thought the purity of a saint like Sri Ramakrishna!* He was horror-struck at his own conduct and did not know what to say. Sri Ramakrishna understood the whole situation and consoled his young disciple with the encouraging words: "Yes, one should observe a Sadhu by day as well as at night before one accepts him as a guide." With these words Sri Ramakrishna came to his room, followed mutely by Jogin. In spite of the sweet words from Sri Ramakrishna, he had no sleep throughout the rest of the night, and later throughout his whole life he did not forgive himself for what he considered to be an extremely sinful act.

There are many incidents as to how Jogin, with all his devotion to Sri Ramakrishna, kept

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

his critical faculty alert and did not fail to judge even his Guru. Once he asked Sri Ramakrishna how one could get rid of sex-idea. Sri Ramakrishna said that it could be easily done by prayer to God. This simple remedy did not satisfy him. He thought that there were so many persons who prayed to God, but nevertheless there came no change in their lives. He had expected Sri Ramakrishna would suggest to him some Yogic practice, but he was disappointed in that, and came to the conclusion that Sri Ramakrishna's simple remedy was the outcome of his ignorance of any other better means. During that time there stayed at Dakshineswar a Hatha-Yogi who would show to visitors his dexterity in many Yogic feats. Jogin got interested in him. Once he came to Dakshineswar and without meeting Sri Ramakrishna went straight to the Hatha-Yogi and was listening to his words spellbound. Strangely enough, exactly at that moment Sri Ramakrishna chanced to come to that place. Seeing him there, Sri Ramakrishna very endearingly caught hold of his arms and while leading him towards his own room said: "Why did you go there? If you practise these Yogic exercises your whole thought will be concentrated on the body and not on God." He was not the person to submit so easily. He thought within himself, perhaps Sri Ramakrishna was jealous of the Hatha-Yogi and was afraid lest his allegiance be transferred to the latter. He always thought himself to be very clever. But on second thought he tried the

remedy suggested by Sri Ramakrishna. To his great surprise he found wonderful results and felt ashamed of his doubting mind. Afterwards Swami Vivekananda used to say, "If there is any one amongst us who is completely free from sex-idea, it is Jogin."

To recount another incident of a similar type. Once he found that Sri Ramakrishna was very much perturbed over the fact that his share of the consecrated food of the temple had not been sent to him. Usually the cashier of the temple would distribute the food offered in the temple after the worship had been finished. Being impatient Sri Ramakrishna sent a messenger to the cashier and afterwards he himself went to him to inquire about the matter. Jogin was proud of his aristocratic birth. When he saw Sri Ramakrishna agitated over such a trifle, he thought that Sri Ramakrishna might be a great saint, but still his anxiety at missing the consecrated food was the result of his family tradition and influence: being born in a poor priest-family he was particular about such insignificant things.

While he was thinking this way, Sri Ramakrishna came and of his own accord said: "Rani Rasmani arranged that the consecrated food should be distributed amongst Sadhus. Thereby she will acquire some merit. But these officers without considering that fact give away the offerings at the temple to their friends and sometimes even to undesirable persons. So I am particular to see that the pious desire of that noble lady is fulfilled."

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

When he heard this, he was amazed to see that even an insignificant act of Sri Ramakrishna was not without deep meaning, and he felt ashamed at the opinion he had formed about Sri Ramakrishna.

Jogin began to grow spiritually under the keen care of Sri Ramakrishna. Afterwards when Sri Ramakrishna fell ill and was under medical treatment at Shyampukur and Cossipore, he was one of those disciples who laboured day and night in attending to the needs and comfort of their beloved Master. Too much strain due to this told upon the none too strong health of Jogin, but the devoted disciple was undaunted.

Sri Ramakrishna was sinking. No amount of care on the part of the disciples could arrest the progress of the disease. His life was despaired of. One day Sri Ramakrishna called Jogin to him and asked him to read out a certain portion of the Bengali almanac to him. In doing this, while Jogin was reading about a certain date, Sri Ramakrishna told him to stop. It was the date on which Sri Ramakrishna passed away.

The Mahasamadhi of Sri Ramakrishna threw all his disciples into deep gloom. They now laid still greater stress on spiritual practices in order to fill up the great void in their hearts. The Holy Mother went to Vrindavan and remained almost day and night absorbed in meditation. Jogin along with another disciple, Latu, was with her in attendance. At this time Jogin also performed hard Tapasya.

After ■ stay for a year at Vrindavan, the Holy

Mother returned to Bengal and stayed in a house on the bank of the Ganges near the present site of Belur Math. There also he was her attendant. In fact, his service to the Holy Mother was wonderful. In looking after the comfort of the Holy Mother, he threw all personal considerations to the wind. For, did he not see the living presence of the Master in her? Then to serve her with all devotion and care, he thought, was his best religion.

Some time in 1891, Jogin who had now become Swami Yogananda, went to Benares. There he spent his days in hard Tapasya. He lived in a solitary garden-house absorbed in spiritual practices. It is said that during this period he would grudge the time to be spent even for taking meals. He would beg his food—some pieces of bread—one day and for the following three or four days these pieces of bread soaked in water would constitute his whole meal. During this time there was a great riot in Benares, but he commanded such respect in the vicinity that rioters of both sides would not even disturb him. The hardship which he was undergoing was too much for his constitution, which broke down completely. Swami Yogananda never regained his normal health. But when the mind is given to God, what does it matter if the body is ill or well? He found supreme bliss in his inner world, so physical illness did not disturb his serenity of mind. From Benares he returned to the Math at Baranagore. He was still ailing. But his bright, smiling face belied his illness.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Who could imagine that he was ill when he would be seen whole-heartedly engaged in fun and merry-making with his beloved brother-disciples !

When the Holy Mother came to Calcutta, Swami Yogananda again became her attendant. He spent about a year in devoted service to the Holy Mother. After that he stayed chiefly at the house of Balaram Bose in Calcutta. He was now a permanently sick person—a victim of stomach trouble. But he was the source of much attraction. So great was his amiability that whoever would come into contact with him would be charmed with him. One would at once feel at home with him. Some young men who got the opportunity of mixing with him at this time afterwards joined the Ramakrishna Order and became monks.

Swami Yogananda was the first to organise a public celebration of the birthday anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna on a large scale. It was performed at Dakshineswar. The success of this celebration, against tremendous odds, was due to the great influence Swami Yogananda had over men—specially of the younger generation. The organising ability of Swami Yogananda was evidenced also when a grand reception was given to Swami Vivekananda in 1897 on his return from America. Swami Yogananda was the moving spirit behind that.

After his return to India, when Swami Vivekananda made his proposal of starting an organisation to his brother-disciples, Swami Yogananda was the person to raise protest. His contention

was that Sri Ramakrishna wanted all to devote their time and energy exclusively to spiritual practices, but that Vivekananda, deviating from the Master's teachings, was starting an organisation on his own initiative. This provoked the Great Lion too much and made him unconsciously reveal a part of his inner life. Swami Vivekananda feelingly said that he (meaning himself) was too insignificant to improve upon the teachings of that spiritual giant—Sri Ramakrishna, that if Sri Ramakrishna liked he could create hundreds of Vivekanandas from a handful of dust, but that he had made Swami Vivekananda simply a tool for carrying out his mission, and Swami Vivekananda had no will but that of Sri Ramakrishna. Such astounding faith of Swami Vivekananda in Sri Ramakrishna stunned all that were present there, and had the effect of winning over Swami Yogananda immediately.

When the Ramakrishna Mission Society was actually started, Swami Yogananda was made one of its office-bearers. This was not the only occasion when Swami Yogananda showed the power of individual judgment and of a great critical faculty by challenging the very leader—Swami Vivekananda, though his love for the latter was very, very deep. Indeed, one who dared examine the conduct of his Guru with a critical eye before fully submitting to him, could not spare his Gurubhai. So whenever Swami Yogananda differed from Swami Vivekananda, he was bold enough to say it straightforwardly.

Two years after the incident referred to above

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

with reference to Swami Vivekananda's starting an organisation, a similar thing happened. Swami Vivekananda was accused by his Gurubhais of not preaching the ideas of their Master. For Sri Ramakrishna insisted on Bhakti and on the practice of Sadhanas for the realisation of God, whereas Swami Vivekananda constantly urged them to go about working, preaching and serving the poor and the diseased—the very things which make the mind out-going. Here also Swami Yogananda started the discussion. At first the discussion began in a light-hearted mood on both sides. But gradually Swami Vivekananda became serious, till at last he was choked with emotion and found visibly contending with his love for the poor and his reverence for Guru. Tears filled his eyes and his whole frame began to shake. In order to hide his feelings Swami Vivekananda left the spot immediately. But the atmosphere was so tense that none dared break the silence even after the Swami had left. A few minutes later some of the Gurubhais went to the apartment of Swami Vivekananda and found him sitting in meditation posture, his whole frame stiff and tears flowing from his half-closed eyes. It was nearly an hour before the Swami returned to his waiting friends in the sitting room, and when he began to talk, all found that the love of Swami Vivekananda for the Master was much deeper than what could be seen from a superficial view. But Swami Vivekananda was not allowed to talk on that subject. Swami Yogananda and others

SWAMI YOGANANDA

took him away from the room to divert his thoughts.

Swami Yogananda again became the attendant of the Holy Mother and stayed with her in Calcutta. But as he was too weak to attend to all her work, a young monk was taken as his assistant. When the Holy Mother was in Calcutta, naturally many ladies would flock to her. Seeing the situation, Swami Vivekananda once took Swami Yogananda to task for keeping a young Brahmacharin as his assistant: for if the celibate life of the latter was endangered who would be responsible? "I," came the immediate reply from Swami Yogananda, "I am ready to sacrifice my all for him." The words were uttered with so much sincerity and earnestness that everyone who heard them could not but admire the large-heartedness of Swami Yogananda.

In 1898 Swami Yogananda organised the birthday celebration of Sri Ramakrishna in a place near Belur, as it could not be held at Dakshineswar for various reasons. This was the last birthday celebration of Sri Ramakrishna which Swami Yogananda could attend. For, in the next year—in 1899, on March 28, he passed away. Swami Yogananda was the first among the monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna to enter Mahasamadhi.

His passing away was wonderful. His words before death were: "My Jnana and Bhakti have so much increased that I cannot express them." An old Sannyasin brother who was at

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

the bedside at the solemn moment said that they felt all of a sudden such an inflow of a higher state of being, that they vividly realised that the soul was passing to a higher, freer and superior state of consciousness than the bodily.

Swami Vivekananda was greatly moved at the passing away of Swami Yogananda and very feelingly remarked, "This is the beginning of the end."

Outwardly the life of Swami Yogananda was uneventful. It is very difficult to give or find out details through which one can see his personality. Only those who moved with him closely could see something of his spiritual eminence. One of the younger members of the Math at that time wrote with regard to him: "He was such a great saint that it fills one with awe to belong to the Order that contained him, even as the youngest member." Swami Yogananda commanded great love and respect from all the lay and monastic disciples of the Ramakrishna Order. He was one of those whom Sri Ramakrishna spotted out as "Ishwarakotis" or "Eternally perfect,"—one of the souls which are never in bondage but now and then come to this world of ours for guiding humanity Godwards.

It is more than four decades that Swami Yogananda passed away, many of the younger monks of the Ramakrishna Mission have not even seen him, but the sacred memory of that great Swami is a supreme inspiration to one and all. With how much devotion do they utter his name, and with what great eagerness do they hear even a

SWAMI YOGANANDA

trifling incident of his life ! He has occupied a large part of their hearts. Such is the influence of noble life though silently lived.

IV

SWAMI NIRANJANANANDA

Swami Niranjanananda was one of those few disciples whom Sri Ramakrishna termed as Nitya-siddhas or Ishwarakotis—that is, souls who are perfect from their very birth and are not caught by Maya at any time. With particular reference to Niranjanananda the Master once said that he was born with the characteristics of Rama inherent in him.

The early name of Swami Niranjanananda was Nityaniranjan Ghosh¹ and he was usually called by the shortened form of Niranjan. He came from a village in Twenty-four Perganas, but lived in Calcutta with his maternal uncle Kalikrishna Mitra. In his boyhood he became associated with a group of spiritualists in Calcutta. He was very often selected as a medium, and a very successful medium he always proved himself to be. At this time he developed some psychic powers—e.g., powers of curing people in a miraculous way and so on. It is said that a very rich man was suffering from insomnia for eighteen long years and sought the help of Niranjan for recovery. Niranjan said

¹In many books it is said that his name was Nityaniranjan Sen. But the latest information indicates that it was a mistake.

afterwards: "I do not know whether that man got any real help from me. But finding the man suffering so much in life in spite of all his riches and wealth, I was seized with a feeling of the emptiness of all worldly things."

Hearing about the great spiritual power of Sri Ramakrishna, Niranjan one afternoon came to Dakshineswar to see him. Some say that Niranjan came to Sri Ramakrishna first with his spiritualist friends. It is said that they tried to make Sri Ramakrishna a medium. At first Sri Ramakrishna agreed and sat like an innocent child to be a medium. But soon he disliked the idea and left the seat.

Niranjan was about eighteen years old when he met Sri Ramakrishna for the first time. He had a very majestic appearance—being a tall figure with broad shoulders and a strong physique. Though a boy, fearlessness beamed through his eyes.

Sri Ramakrishna was surrounded by a circle of devotees when Niranjan came to him. In the evening when all the devotees dispersed, Sri Ramakrishna turned to Niranjan and inquired all about him. Coming to know about his interest in spiritualism, Sri Ramakrishna told young Niranjan: "My boy, if you think of ghosts and spooks, ghosts and spooks you will become. And if you think of God, divine will be your life. Which do you prefer?" "Of course the latter," replied Niranjan. Thereupon Sri Ramakrishna advised Niranjan to sever all connections with the spiritualists, to which Niranjan agreed.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

At the very first meeting Sri Ramakrishna talked with Niranjana as if he had known him for a long time. Sri Ramakrishna, seeing it was getting dark, pressed Niranjana to pass the night at Dakshineswar. But Niranjana could not do that lest his uncle should be anxious for him. He, however, promised to come again.

This meeting, though short, so much impressed Niranjana that all the time on his way home he was thinking about Sri Ramakrishna. At home also Sri Ramakrishna occupied all his thoughts. So within two or three days he again came to Sri Ramakrishna. As soon as Sri Ramakrishna saw the boy near the door, he ran to him and warmly embraced him. Then with deep feelings he began to say: "My boy, days are passing, when will you realise God? And if you do not realise God, the whole life will be meaningless. I am extremely anxious as to when you will whole-heartedly devote yourself to God." The boy Niranjana was mute with wonder, and thought: "Strange indeed! How could he be so anxious because I have not realised God! Who could this man be?" Anyway these words, uttered with deep feeling, greatly touched the heart of the boy. He spent the night at Dakshineswar. The next day and the day following that were also spent with Sri Ramakrishna in ecstatic joy. It was on the fourth day that he returned to Calcutta. His uncle was in great anxiety for him. When Niranjana returned home, he was scolded for his absence and put under surveillance so that he might not go anywhere.

SWAMI NIRANJANANANDA

Afterwards, however, Niranjan was permitted to go to Dakshineswar whenever he liked.

Niranjan was very frank and open-minded. The Master liked this trait in him because frankness and open-mindedness, in his opinion, were rare virtues—the effect of much Tapasya in one's previous life and they indicated the possibility of realising God. Niranjan had great abhorrence for married life. When his relatives pressed him for marriage, he was alarmed at the very idea. He thought he was being dragged towards his ruin. He was an extremely pure soul. The Master used to say that Niranjan was without any "Anjan"—i.e., without any blemish in his character.

Niranjan was of violent temper, though he had a very tender heart. When provoked, he would lose all sense of proportion. One day he was going to Dakshineswar in a country-boat. Some fellow passengers began to speak ill of Sri Ramakrishna in the hearing of Niranjan. Niranjan at first protested. But finding that it was of no avail, he began to rock the boat, threatening to drown the passengers for their misconduct. The robust appearance and the furious mood of Niranjan struck terror into the hearts of the calumniators, who immediately apologised for their improper behaviour. When Sri Ramakrishna heard of this incident, he severely took Niranjan to task for his violent temper. "Anger is a deadly sin, why should you be subject to it? Foolish people in their pitiable ignorance say many things. One should

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

completely ignore them as beneath notice," said Sri Ramakrishna.

At one time Niranjan was compelled to accept a situation in an office. When the news reached Sri Ramakrishna, he was greatly aggrieved and remarked, "I should not have been more pained had I heard of his death." Afterwards when he learned that Niranjan had accepted the situation to maintain his aged mother, Sri Ramakrishna breathed a sigh of relief and said: "Ah, then it is all right. It will not contaminate your mind. But if you had done so for your own sake, I could not have touched you. Really it was unthinkable that you could stoop to such humiliation." Hearing these words, when one of the audience asked Sri Ramakrishna if he was decrying service and if so, how one could maintain oneself and one's family, Sri Ramakrishna remarked: "Let others do whatever they like. I say these with reference to those young aspirants who form a class by themselves."

Niranjan could not be long in the service. When Sri Ramakrishna was ill at Cossipore, Niranjan was one of those young disciples who stayed with him and day and night attended to the needs of the Master, with the hope that they would be able to cure him through their devoted service.

After the passing of Sri Ramakrishna, Niranjan joined the monastery at Baranagore and gave himself up heart and soul to the realisation of Truth. Now and then spurred by the spirit of freedom, which does not allow a monk to confine

SWAMI NIRANJANANANDA

himself to one place, Niranjan also would go hither and thither; but the monastery at Baranagore and afterwards at Alambazar, when it was removed there, was, as it were, the headquarters for him as well as for all his Gurubhais.

He was the peer of Sasi (Swami Ramakrishnananda) in extraordinary steadfastness to the worship of the relic of the Master enshrined in the monastery. His faith in Sri Ramakrishna was so very living that it made him strong enough not to care at all for the praise or the blame of the whole world.

When Swami Vivekananda, after his triumphant success in the West, was returning to India, Swami Niranjanananda hastened to Colombo to receive him there.

Afterwards Niranjanananda accompanied Swami Vivekananda to some places in his tour through Northern India. For some time he stayed in Benares performing Tapasya and living on Madhukari Bhiksha.

During the last few years of his life he suffered greatly from dysentery, and passed away in May, 1904, from an attack of cholera at Hardwar where he had gone for a change of climate.

Swami Niranjanananda had a very loving heart, though his appearance would inspire awe. His last meeting with the Holy Mother was very touching. "It disclosed his loving, impulsive nature. He made no mention of the approaching end, but was like a tearful child clinging to its mother. He insisted that the Holy Mother do everything for him, even feed him, and he

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

wanted only what she had made ready for his meal. When the time came for him to leave her, reluctantly he threw himself at her feet, weeping tears of tender sadness; then silently he went away, knowing that he would never see her again,"—records a devotee.

Indeed his devotion to the Holy Mother was unsurpassable. Swami Vivekananda used to say, "Niranjan has got so much devotion to the Holy Mother that I can forgive his thousand and one faults only because of that."

There was a strange mixture of tenderness and sternness in him. His love for truth was uncompromising and counted no cost. Once a gentleman of Calcutta built a Shiva temple in the city of Benares. When Swami Vivekananda heard of this he remarked, "If he does something for relieving the sufferings of the poor, he will acquire the merit of building a thousand such temples." When this remark of the great Swami reached the ears of the gentleman, he came forward with a big offer of pecuniary help to the Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service at Benares—then in a nucleus state. But afterwards, as the first impulse of enthusiasm cooled down, he wanted to curtail the sum which he had originally offered. This breach of promise so much offended Swami Niranjanananda's sense of regard for truth that he rejected the offer altogether though that meant great difficulty for the institution.

It is very hard to estimate a spiritual personality by external events. The height of spiritual

SWAMI NIRANJANANANDA

eminence of a person can be perceived, and that also only to some extent, by the inspiration he radiates. Swami Niranjanananda left the stamp of his life on many persons. Some even renounced everything for the sake of God and joined the Ramakrishna Order because of his influence. He left one Sannyasin disciple. Above all, to know Swami Niranjanananda we must turn to what the Master said about him: that Swami Niranjanananda was one of his "Antarangas," i.e., belonged to the inner circle of his devotees.

V

SWAMI ADVAITANANDA

Swami Advaitananda in his pre-monastic days was known as Gopal Sur. He was the oldest of the monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. He was older than even the Master by a few years. Because of his age Sri Ramakrishna would address him as "aged Gopal," and the devotees and disciples of the Master would call him Gopaldâ or Gopal the older brother. He was born in a village a few miles to the south of Calcutta but usually he lived in Sinthi near Calcutta. Gopal was an employee in a shop in Chinabazar, Calcutta, belonging to Beni Pal of Sinthi. Beni Pal was a devout Brahmo, and in the religious celebrations which he performed at his place the Master would also occasionally be present. Perhaps it was at these meetings that Gopal first met the Master. Gopalda's version of one of these religious festivals at the house of Beni Pal was that the Master sang devotional songs and performed an ecstatic dance with so much enthusiasm and for such a long time that his body got heated and he jumped into an adjacent pond to cool himself. As a consequence he got a severe cold which resulted in the throat sore and throat cancer to which he finally succumbed.

Gopalda was a married man. At the death of

his wife he had received such a great shock that he did not know what to do. A friend, who was a devotee of the Master, asked him to go to Dakshineswar, which he did. On the first visit Gopalda was not very impressed by the Master nor did he find anything very remarkable in him. But his friend insisted on his repeating the visit, for holy men do not often reveal themselves at once. Gopalda complied, and this time he was caught in the love of Sri Ramakrishna. As he began to frequent Dakshineswar, the overwhelming burden of his grief was completely removed. The Master's simple explanation of the unreality of the world made a deep impression on his mind, and he began seriously to think of giving up the world in search of God. Ultimately he renounced the world and devoted himself heart and soul to the service of the Master in his last illness. He was very neat and clean and the embodiment of method and orderliness. These traits in him received great appreciation from the Master.

One day Gopalda expressed a desire to the Master to distribute some ochre cloths and rosaries to monks. On this the Master replied: "You won't find better monks than these young boys here. You may give your cloths and rosaries to them." Thereupon Gopalda placed a bundle of saffron cloths before the Master, who distributed them among his young disciples. Thus was sown the seed of the future Ramakrishna Order.

At the Cossipore garden-house Swami Vivekananda, then Narendra Nath, when one day sitting

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

in meditation, was lost to outer consciousness. His mind flew beyond the realm of relative consciousness and was merged in the Absolute. After a long while as he began to regain consciousness, Narendra Nath became conscious of his thought but not of his body. So he cried out, "Where has my body gone?" Hearing this strange utterance, Gopalda rushed to the spot and began to explain that his body was there. But as his words carried no conviction to Narendra Nath, Gopalda got terrified and ran to the Master for help. After some time Narendra Nath returned to his normal consciousness.

After the passing away of the Master, Gopalda had no home to go to. So with him as the first inmate was started the monastery at Baranagore. After staying in this monastery for a few years he went to Benares where he practised Sadhana for about five years. One who had the privilege of staying with him at Benares says that his regularity in spiritual practices was wonderful. Very early in the morning, even in the severe wintry days of Benares, he would get up and go to the Ganges for a bath. From there he would return shivering with cold but his mind absorbed in reciting some Sanskrit hymns. The programme of the whole day was fixed, and he would follow it without the least deviation for days, months and years. At Benares he lived on Madhukari, i.e., small quantities of cooked food collected from various houses, so that it might not be taxing to a single individual. Adjacent to a place where an image of Shiva was installed,

he occupied a small room. But how neat and clean that small room was! Everything kept in its proper place: the room at once gave indication of great taste and orderliness. His steadiness would cause wonder to those who watched him. He was quite indifferent to worldly sights and sounds, and followed his own tenor of life in the contemplation of the Divinity from day to day without any break.

When Swami Vivekananda returned to India and organised the Ramakrishna Brotherhood, Swami Advaitananda, the name he was given when he became a monk, returned to the Math at Alambazar. Afterwards he stayed mainly at the new monastery at Belur Math. He looked after the management of various affairs of the monastery, specially the garden work. But all work he undertook or supervised had to be done very systematically and with scrupulous care. The young novitiates could hardly rise to his standard of perfection as regards work, and for that reason they had a very hard time with him. Many of them would receive mild rebukes from old Gopalda, but they would take his criticisms more as a token of affection than as any indication of bitterness. Gopalda, however, would say latterly: "The Master has shown me that it is He who is manifested through all. Then whom to blame or whom to criticise?" After this experience Gopalda ceased from finding fault with anyone however great might be the latter's errors.

Even in his old age he was self-supporting.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

He would not like anybody to take the trouble of attending to his personal needs.

Being the most senior in age he was looked upon with affectionate regard by all his brother-disciples. But they also enjoyed making fun with him. Swami Vivekananda composed a comical verse in order to tease Gopalda, but that really indicated in what great esteem Gopalda was held by all.

Gopalda made strenuous efforts to mould his life according to the life and example of the Master, and would sometimes express disappointment that he fell so short of the ideal. But this feeling of disappointment indicated only his real spiritual height. Because of his age Gopalda did not engage himself in any public activity, philanthropic, missionary or otherwise, so his monastic life was quite uneventful. But so long as he was in the physical body, he definitely set an example to all, and he was the source of inspiration to many. His uniform steadfastness in Sadhana till the last days of his life elicited admiration, if not reverence, even from his brother-disciples. His love for truth was wonderful. He heard the Master say that one should not twist truth even to make fun. Gopalda obeyed this instruction to the letter and the spirit and insisted on others doing likewise.

He travelled extensively and visited, at one time or other in his life, sacred places like Kedar-nath, Badrinarayan and Hardwar in the North, Dwarka in the West and Rameswar and other places in the South. He kept sound health till

SWAMI ADVAITANANDA

the good old age he lived to. After suffering for some time from stomach trouble, he passed away on December 28, 1904, at the age of eighty-one.

VI

SWAMI RAMAKRISHNANANDA

Even while Swami Vivekananda was in the midst of his arduous labours in the West, he realised that more important work was awaiting him in India. The soul of the nation was to be roused to a sense of its own worth. Forgotten values of life were to be brought back to light. Religion was to be made a living force which would strengthen the people and lead them to realise the fullness of life. When the great leader returned to the motherland and made his triumphal tour from Colombo to Almora, it was in the city of Madras that he first intimated to eager listeners his plan of campaign. There was great enthusiasm and a genuine desire on the part of the people to learn more of the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. Some of the citizens approached Swami Vivekananda with the request that he should kindly send one of his brother-disciples to stay in Madras and establish a monastery which would become the centre of the religious teachings and philanthropic activities outlined by the Swami in his addresses delivered in India and abroad. By way of reply Swami Vivekananda said, "I shall send you one who is more orthodox than your most orthodox men of the South and who is at the same time unique and unsurpassed in his worship and meditation



Swami Ramakrishnananda



Swami Trigunatitananda (P. 172)

SWAMI RAMAKRISHNANANDA

on God." The very next steamer from Calcutta brought to Madras Swami Ramakrishnananda.

In a few words the leader had summarised the individual characteristics of the apostle in relation to the field of work for which he was chosen. South India has all along been the stronghold of orthodox Hinduism. When Buddhism in the days of its decadence upset the ancient religion and made men lose faith in the Eternal Dharma, it was the Alvars, the Nayanmars and Acharyas of the South who gave new vigour to the religion of the Rishis. Again when foreign invasions disturbed the practice of the old religion, it was South India that closely guarded the sacred Vedic fire and passed it on to others when the opportune time came. In order to infuse new life into the ancient religion without breaking the continuity of the tradition the apostle to the South had to be a person of great intellectual attainments, of unflinching devotion to the ideal and of deep reverence for the forms of worship and religious practices sanctified by the authority of a succession of great teachers. Swami Ramakrishnananda possessed all these and in addition he had an overflowing kindness, abounding sympathy for all and a childlike nature which exhibited the inner purity of the soul.

Sasibhushan Chakravarti—that was the name by which Swami Ramakrishnananda was known in his pre-monastic days—was born in an orthodox Brahmin family of the Hooghly district, Bengal, in the year 1863. His father, a strict observer of religious traditions and a devout

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

worshipper of the Divine Mother, gave the early training that laid the foundation of the lofty character exhibited in the life of his great son.

Sasibhushan went to school, and having successfully completed the school course entered college. He was a brilliant student at college and his favourite subjects were literature (both English and Sanskrit), mathematics and philosophy. He and his cousin Sarat Chandra—afterwards Swami Saradananda—came under the influence of the Brahmo Samaj. Sasi became intimately known to the Brahmo leader, Keshab Chandra Sen, and was appointed private tutor to his sons.

Sasibhushan and his cousin Sarat Chandra were members of a Brahmo organisation started under the influence of Keshab Chandra Sen, and learned of Sri Ramakrishna from some fellow members of the association. In order to enjoy the company of the saint, the members of this association resolved to celebrate their anniversary at Dakshineswar. This event took place on a certain day in October, 1883. Sasi and Sarat arrived at Dakshineswar and along with a few other boy-companions went to see the Master. Sri Ramakrishna received them with a smile and began to talk to them warmly about the need of renunciation in spiritual life. Sasi was then reading in the F. A. class and the others were preparing for matriculation. As Sasi was the oldest of the band the conversation was addressed to him. In the course of conversation Sri Ramakrishna asked Sasi whether he believed in God

SWAMI RAMAKRISHNANANDA

with form or without form. The boy frankly answered that as he was not certain about the existence of God and was not, therefore, able to speak one way or the other. The reply pleased the Master very much. Sasi and Sarat were fascinated by the personality of Sri Ramakrishna. They henceforth made the Master the pole-star of their lives.

Of Sasi and Sarat Sri Ramakrishna used to say that both of them were the followers of Jesus the Christ in a former incarnation. Were they James the son of Zebedee and John his brother who were so often mentioned as next only to Simon Peter, the chief apostle? However that may be, subsequent events show that both the cousins, Sasi and Sarat, became pillars of the Order of the great philanthropic organisation founded in the name of the Master.

Although Sasi was a brilliant student his interest in the college curriculum began to dwindle. What was loss in one respect was a great gain from another point of view. Slowly and silently Sasi was progressing in the life of the spirit. His keen intellect, robust physique and steady character were beginning to centre round the one grand theme of God-realisation. One day at Dakshineswar it happened that Sasi was busily engaged in studying some Persian books in order to read the Sufi poets in the original. The Master called him thrice before he heard. When he came, Sri Ramakrishna asked him what he had been doing. Sasi told that he was engaged with his books. Sri Ramakrishna quietly remarked,

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

“If you forget your duties for the sake of study you will lose all your devotion.” Sasi understood. He took the Persian books and threw them into the Ganges. From that time on book-learning had little importance in his scheme of life.

Sasi was now in the final B. A. class; the examination was fast approaching. But at that very time Sri Ramakrishna was lying ill in the Cossipore garden-house. The young disciple had to decide between his studies and service to the person of the Master. Unhesitatingly Sasi decided to renounce his possible career as a man of the world and to give his body, mind and soul wholly and unreservedly to the service of the Master. He with other brother-disciples began to serve the Master day and night. Sasi was the very embodiment of service. His devotion to the Guru was unparalleled. Other disciples also gave their very best in the service of the Master. But Sasi's case was conspicuous. He knew no rest, he forgot all idea of food and drink, there was no other thought in him except how to alleviate the suffering of the Master. He did not care for any other spiritual practice. Service to the Guru was the only concern of his life. His idea was that this would give him everything that is covetable in spiritual life. Nay, he did not bother about any arithmetic in regard to spiritual life. He was too engrossed in the service of the Master to think of anything else. Those who saw him at that time marvelled at his indefatigable energy and wonderful power of endurance.

SWAMI RAMAKRISHNANANDA

Fortunately he was endowed with a strong physique. But more than that behind the body there was a mind whose strength was incessantly sustained by his love and devotion to the Guru.

Till the last moment of the earthly existence of the Master, Sasi was unflagging in his zeal to serve him as best he could. Before Sri Ramakrishna lay down for the final departure, he sat up for some time against some five or six pillows which were supported by Sasi, who was at the same time fanning him. When the Master was in Mahasamadhi the disciples could not at first realise what it was. Many thought it was perhaps a phenomenon of Samadhi, which was a constant affair with Sri Ramakrishna. Sasi rebuked those who thought that it was otherwise than Samadhi, and along with others began to chant holy texts. But even after long waiting the body did not indicate any sign of life, and the doctor finally declared it to be Mahasamadhi.

The greatest trial was at the burning ghat. Feelings of a contrasting character visited the soul of Sasi. Now the joy and bliss the Master had shed over them all at the time of the Mahasamadhi came over him and he sang the name of the Master in triumphant praise. Then a sense of utter loneliness stole over his joy and made him the victim of most violent grief. When the flames that had made ashes of the body of the Master had died out, amidst the silence that prevailed, Sasi gathered the sacred relics.

Then came the period of supreme depression. The boys who were children of the Master

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

gathered together day and night at the newly founded monastery at Baranagore. Their words were reminiscences of their years with him; their thoughts were of him; their worship was to him; their lives were lived in his name. Many of them were accustomed to the comparative ease and comfort of well-to-do families. But their deep devotion to the ideal made them face hardships unflinchingly. Sasi played no small part in holding the young band together and in regulating the routine of life to be followed by them. He would force them to rise from their meditation to partake of food. He would send them to repose by force when they continued hour after hour into the night the chanting of the praises of God. While others were indifferent as to whether the body lived or went in their intense search for the Highest, Sasi took care that his brother-disciples had not actually to face starvation. He went so far as to serve as a schoolmaster—though for a very short period—to meet the expenses of the Math. He would say to his brothers: "You just continue your spiritual practices with undivided attention. You need not bother about anything else. I shall maintain the Math by begging." Swami Vivekananda, recalling these blessed days many years later, said with reference to Swami Ramakrishnananda, "Oh, what a steadfastness to the ideal did we ever find in Sasi! He was a mother to us. It was he who managed about our food. We used to get up at three o'clock in the morning. Then all of us, some after bathing, would go to the worshiproom

and be lost in Japa and meditation. There were times when the meditation lasted to four or five o'clock in the afternoon. Sasi would be waiting with our dinner; if necessary, he would by sheer force drag us out of our meditation. Who cared then if the world existed or not !”

The parents of the boys came and attempted to take them back to their homes, but they would not yield. Sasi's father came, begged and threatened, but to no purpose. The son said, “The world and home are to me as a place infested with tigers.” The time came when the boys decided to renounce the world formally by taking the monastic vows. They changed their names. Sasi became Ramakrishnananda. Narendra Nath, the leader of the young band, wanted to have that name for himself but thought that Sasi had a better claim to it because of his unparalleled love for the Master. Indeed Sasi's love for the Master sounds like a story—nay, has passed into stories. Death could not rob Sasi of the living presence of the Master. He served the Master in the relics with the same devotion and earnestness as when he had been physically alive. Others went on pilgrimages, adopting the wandering life of the monk. Swami Ramakrishnananda stuck like a sentinel on to the holy spot where the Master's relics were temporarily enshrined. Worshipping the Master and keeping the monastery as the centre to which the wanderers would occasionally return were the duties which Ramakrishnananda assigned to himself. He did not think of going to a single place of pilgrimage.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

What place under the sun could be more sacred to him than where the relics of the Master lay? He would personally attend to all the items of worship; he would bring water from the Ganges, gather flowers and prepare the food to be offered. He would not take any food that was not offered to the Master. The very soul of devotion entered into Swami Ramakrishnananda. Others were transported into superconscious joy and vision of God by the enflaming spirit of his enthusiasm. Hours were passed in devotion, and days and nights, and it was this unparalleled devotion which formed the spirit which has become externally expressed as the Ramakrishna Order.

The leader urged by the Divine Spirit left the shores of India. For a period there was no information about him, and the brother-monks deeply felt the separation. Then came the news of his brilliant success at the Parliament of Religions. Whenever Swami Vivekananda wrote to his brother-monks from abroad, he would address the message to Swami Ramakrishnananda, who indeed had become the pillar of the monastery.

If Sasi's devotion to the Guru was beyond comparison with any earthly example, his love for Swami Vivekananda, whom Sri Ramakrishna had ordained as the leader of the whole group, was wonderful. Any word from the leader was more than a command to Sasi. There was no trouble which he would not face, no sacrifice which he would not make in deference to the slightest wish of Swami Vivekananda. This

SWAMI RAMAKRISHNANANDA

spirit was so strongly manifest in him, that Swami Vivekananda would at times make fun with him taking advantage of his love. Sasi, as we have seen, was very orthodox in his attitude and ritualistic in religious observances. One day the leader asked him, "Sasi, I want to put your love for me to the test. Can you buy me a piece of English bread from a Mohammedan shop?" Sasi at once agreed and actually did the thing. Nobody could believe that it was possible for Sasi to do such a thing. But it was for the sake of the beloved leader!

After Swami Vivekananda's return from the West when he proposed to Sasi to go to Madras to do preaching work, Sasi at once responded to the call. It meant that he would have to give up many habits of long years, it meant that he would have to leave the place where he was so steadfastly worshipping the relics of the Master. But these were no considerations against the wish of the leader. So by the next available boat Swami Ramakrishnananda started for South India.

After the Master had discouraged his book-learning, Sasi lost all interest in study. His whole heart was centred in devotion and worship. Now he was asked to preach religion and philosophy. The great heart had to become the mighty intellect. It may be that for this reason the leader directed Swami Ramakrishnananda to go to Madras. We have already remarked how this apostle to the South stood in relation to the field chosen for his missionary labours. A

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

combination of deep devotion and keen intellect is something very rare. But this very rare type was needed for the work in South India and it was the good fortune of that province to get Swami Ramakrishnananda. The Ramakrishna Mission work in the South now stands as a noble edifice giving shelter to thousands of persons who seek the consolation which religion alone can give. But the strong foundation for this imposing edifice was firmly laid by the great monk, the first apostle of the Ramakrishna Order to Madras. The Mission work in South India is spread over several districts and is carried on by many centres, the genesis of all of which can be traced back to the hand of Swami Ramakrishnananda.

Pioneer work is always accompanied by many difficulties. Homeless, alone and often foodless, the pioneer worker has to toil hard; he has to meet many disappointing and discouraging situations which try his patience very much. But the protecting hand of the Deity is always there, manifesting itself much more than it does after the work has grown and men rally round to co-operate in the work feeling it an honour to render such help and co-operation.

Swami Ramakrishnananda arrived at Madras in 1897. At first he was housed in a small building near the "Ice House," from where he had to shift to some rooms in the Ice House itself. A little later when the house was auctioned away by the owner, the Swami had to stay in an out-house of the same building at great personal inconvenience. In this connection an incident

SWAMI RAMAKRISHNANANDA

happened which showed how the Swami lived absorbed in the realm of the spirit and did not care at all for anything which smacked of the secular. When the Ice House was put to auction, the devotees very much wished that if possible some of their friends should purchase it, so that Swami Ramakrishnananda might not be inconvenienced and his work might go on smoothly. As the auction was proceeding, the Swami sat unconcerned in a far end of the compound on a rickety bench away from the crowd that had gathered. A devotee was anxiously watching the bidding, and now and then went up to the Swami to tell him how it was progressing. The Swami looked up and said: "Why do you worry about it? What do we care who buys or sells? My wants are few. I need only a small room for Sri Guru Maharaj. I can stay anywhere and spend my time in talking of him." Indeed such was the attitude of the Swami throughout his whole life, even latterly when he received much ovation and many honours.

It was in 1907 that a permanent house for the Math was constructed on a small site in a suburb of the city. The house was a simple one-storied building consisting of four rooms, a spacious hall, kitchen and outhouses. The Swami was delighted when at last there was a permanent place¹ where the Master's worship could be carried on uninterruptedly. He said: "This is a fine house

¹This building has since been demolished and in its place stands a much larger building, providing more and better accommodation.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

for Sri Ramakrishna to live in. Realising that he occupies it, we must keep it very clean and very pure. We should take care not to disfigure the walls by driving nails or otherwise."

The worship of the Master as done by Swami Ramakrishnananda was very striking. A spiritual aspirant longs to experience the tangible presence of God. But with Swami Ramakrishnananda it was an entirely different matter. He so vividly realised the presence of God that there was no room for any hankering for that in his mind. It was only left to him to serve Him, and he did it with unwavering ardour. He would serve his Master exactly in the way he did while he was in the physical body. Some article of food is preferred hot, Swami Ramakrishnananda would keep the stove burning and offer that piece by piece to the Master. He would offer to the Master ■ piece of twig hammered soft to be used as a toothbrush, as is the practice in some Indian homes. After the food was offered he would fan the Master for some time so that the latter could easily have his nap. On hot days he would suddenly wake up at night, open the shrine and fan the Master so that the latter might not be disturbed in sleep because of the sweltering heat. Sometimes he would talk sulkily with the Master, blaming him for something. To a critical mind these things might seem queer, but he only knew what great Presence he felt. These actions were so natural and spontaneous with him that a witness would sometimes even fall into respecting him for them. Once a certain gentleman, who

SWAMI RAMAKRISHNANANDA

was then holding the highest position in Government service, called at the monastery to pay his respects to Swami Ramakrishnananda. The Swami, after finishing the morning worship, was at that time fanning the portrait of the Master, which he would do for a couple of hours and more, uttering the names of the Lord—Shiva guru, Sat guru, Sanatana guru, Parama guru, and so on. During such times, the face of the Swami would be flushed red with emotion and his tall and robust figure would look more imposing. The whole sight struck the visitor with such awe and reverence that he could do nothing but prostrate before the Swami and return home.

A bold student to whom the Swami gave the liberty of arguing, once freely criticised him for worshipping the portrait of a dead man as that indicated aberration of mind. The Swami said in reply that a devotee's eyes and mind were very peculiarly transformed, and if others had not such eyes and mind it was not the fault of the devotee. He even went to the length of saying that the images in temples were not simply dull, dead, inert matter, but were living Gods who could be spoken to. There was such a ring of sincerity and genuineness of feeling behind these words that the critic was at once silenced. He could not raise himself to the spiritual height whence these thoughts came, but in spite of himself the conviction stole on him, as he himself afterwards narrated, that what he heard could not but be true.

A superficial critic might say that the devotion

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

of Swami Ramakrishnananda indicated an unbalanced cultivation of religious emotion, but this criticism was entirely wrong, for the Swami had intellectual acumen of a very high order. True, for a period he had lost all interest in study. But when he brushed up his knowledge and gave attention to that direction as necessitated by the responsibility that was placed on him, he showed exceptional ability. His scholarship in Sanskrit scriptures was immense. He thought of writing a Sanskrit commentary on the Brahma-Sutras harmonising the different schools of thought on the Vedanta. But unfortunately his life was cut short and he could not undertake the work. Not knowing the local dialect, he had sometimes to hold conversations with orthodox Pandits in Sanskrit. He wrote the life of the great Acharya Ramanuja in Bengali, which has become an authoritative book on that saint. Not only of Hindu scriptures, but also his knowledge of Christianity and of Islam was superb. He knew the Bible from cover to cover and could expound it with a penetrating insight which would strike even orthodox Christian theologians with awe. Once on a Good Friday he gave a talk on the Crucifixion with so much depth of feeling and vividness of description that a Western listener, with experience of sermons in churches, became amazed as to how the words of the Swami could be so living. Though to all intents and purposes he was living like an orthodox Hindu, his love for the Prophets of other faiths was genuine and sometimes embarrassing to his orthodox

SWAMI RAMAKRISHNANANDA

followers. Those who have seen him going to St. Thomas's Church in Madras relate that he would go straight up to the altar and kneel before it like a Christian and pray.

One evening some Mohammedan students, caught in the rain, took shelter in the monastery. The Swami warmly welcomed them and talked to them not of his own faith but of Islam. His exposition was so illuminating that those Mohammedan students repeated their visit to the monastery many times afterwards.

When holding scripture classes or giving religious discourses, he would not simply explain the texts or repeat the scriptural authorities. He would at times give flashes of illumination from the depth of his realisations. Because of this his words were always penetrating. They would silence even those who came with a combative spirit. With a few words he could explain philosophical problems on which volumes had been written. "That this world is hollow and unreal I can prove in a few minutes," he once said to an inquiring disciple. "All memory exists in the mind. Indeed the mind is made up of memory, therefore all the past and all the future exist in the mind; only the present exists in the senses. Now how long does any sense perception last? Just for the point of time when the object comes in contact with the sense organ, then at once it becomes a matter of memory. This point of time, like Euclid's geometrical point, actually has no magnitude. The present therefore is in reality only such a point without

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

dimensions; but man, because he wishes to live in his senses, magnifies this point....Actually the present has no real conceivable existence and only the past and the future have duration. As these exist in the mind, the whole of the universe may be said to be in the mind; and when a man goes out of his mind, he goes out of the universe."

He had a great knack of probing into the heart of things and of expressing the truth in pithy sayings. Once after discussions with the professor of a local college in regard to politics and religion, the Swami said, "Politics is the freedom of the senses, while religion is freedom *from* the senses." With reference to dualistic and monistic systems of philosophy he once remarked: "In the dualistic method enjoyment is the ideal; in the monistic method freedom is the ideal. By the first the lover gets his beloved at last, and by the second the slave becomes the master. Both are sublime. One has no need to go from one ideal to the other." "Science is the struggle of man in the outer world. Religion is the struggle of man in the inner world," he once said in the course of conversation. "Science makes man struggle for Truth in the outside universe and religion makes him struggle for Truth in the inside universe. Both struggles are great, no doubt, but one ends in success and the other ends in failure. That is the difference. Religion begins where science ends."

Personally he had a great love for mathematics. Once he procured from a local college all the latest authoritative books on astronomy and

SWAMI RAMAKRISHNANANDA

began to study them assiduously. It was not difficult for him to understand them. At times he would be doing mathematical problems as a pastime. But the problems of the inner life engaged the better part of his attention. Delving deep into the realms of the mind, he reached the solution of many problems of the inner life. Full of God-consciousness, his mind rested in the solitude of the sage.

Throughout his stay in Madras the Swami had to work very hard and pass through strenuous days. In the early period he had to cook his own food, do service in the shrine and hold classes in various parts of the city. Sometimes the financial trouble was appalling. But very few people outside his intimate group knew of his difficulties. He would often be very reluctant even to accept the help proffered, for he did not like that anybody should undergo any sacrifice for him. One day there was not a drop of ghee in the Math to fry *chapati*. He was in a fix and began pacing up and down the verandah not knowing where help would come from. As a strange coincidence, a student of his class approached him exactly at that time and whispered into his ear about his intention of contributing his mite to the Math as he had a promotion in the office. But the Swami did not, at first, agree to accept anything from him lest it should cause him some hardship. It was only after great insistence and supplication that the Swami gave out that he might be given some quantity of ghee. If questioned as to how the Swami was

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

meeting his bodily wants, he would say with placid composure, "God sends me whenever I want anything." "If we cannot get on altogether without help, then why not ask the Lord Himself? Why go to others?" he would say. And on many occasions help would come to the Swami in quite unexpected ways. A devotee says, "Once the birthday of Sri Ramakrishna was near and no money had been received for the feeding of the poor, which was an important item of the celebration. It was midnight and I was sleeping in the Math, when I suddenly woke up, roused by strange sounds in the hall. Looking about, I could see Swamiji pacing up and down like a lion in a cage, mumbling noisily with every breath. I was afraid to see him in that condition, but I understood later that it was his praying for help to feed the poor. The next morning money did come. A large donation was received from the Yuvaraja of Mysore who had begun to admire Swamiji, having read his book *The Universe and Man*, just then published."

Without caring for his bodily wants, quite indifferent to his personal needs, the Swami worked tremendously to spread the message of the Master and in the cause of the Vedanta. On certain days of the week he had to lecture more than twice or thrice. His classes were scattered over different parts of the city, and to many of them he had for a long time to go on foot. Sometimes he would return to the Math quite exhausted, and as little energy was left for

SWAMI RAMAKRISHNANANDA

cooking, he would finish his night meal with only a piece of bread purchased from a bakery. People would wonder how the Swami could stand such a severe strain. But the secret of this lay perhaps in his complete self-surrender to the Lord. Once he said: "This body is only an instrument, a passive instrument, and an instrument really has no existence of its own, for it is wholly dependent on the one who uses it. Suppose a pen were conscious, it could say, 'I have written hundreds of letters,' but actually it has done nothing, for the one who holds it has written the letters. So, because we are conscious we think we are doing all these things, whereas in reality we are as much an instrument in the hands of a Higher Power as the pen is in our hands, and He makes all things possible."

While holding classes or delivering lectures he never posed himself as a superior personage having a right to teach others. He considered himself always as a humble servant of the Lord. Sometimes on returning to the Math after delivering lectures he would undergo some self-imposed punishment and earnestly pray to the Master that the lecture-work might not give rise to any sense of egotism in him. Sometimes he had strange experiences in the classes and he had a novel way of meeting them. After the first enthusiasm had died out, all his classes were not so well-attended. That depended also on what part of the city the class was held in. If, for any reason, not a single student happened to come to any of his classes, he would still give his

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

discourse as usual in the empty room or spend in meditation the period fixed for the class. If asked the reason for these unusual actions, the Swami would reply: "I have not come here to teach others. This work is like a vow to me, and I am fulfilling it irrespective of whether any one comes or does not come to my class."

But in regard to what he taught he was uncompromising and fearless. Someone, finding him to hold high the ideals of renunciation and fearing lest some of the young listeners might be attracted to the ideal, suggested that certain devotees who were subscribing towards the maintenance of the Math might not like the Swami's teaching such things to the young people. On hearing these remarks Swami Ramakrishnananda flared up and thundered forth: "What, am I to preach anything other than what I have learnt from my Master? If the Math cannot be financially maintained, I shall very gladly find accommodation in the verandah of one of my students' houses."

The work of the Swami was not confined only to the city of Madras, but it spread throughout the whole Presidency. One of the most important activities along these lines relates to his work in Mysore State. Those who are acquainted with the life of Swami Vivekananda know that in his itinerant days he spent about a month in Mysore as the guest of the Dewan. At that time he came into touch with the then Maharaja and created a profound impression on him. When the signal success of the Swami as a preacher of Vedanta in

SWAMI RAMAKRISHNANANDA

Chicago was known to the Indian public, Bangalore, in 1894, held a public meeting in the Swami's honour and congratulated him on his great work. But for the next nine years there was hardly any activity in Mysore with reference to the movement started by Swami Vivekananda.

When the name and influence of Swami Ramakrishnananda as a bearer of the message of the Master and of Swami Vivekananda began to spread, in 1903 the Vedanta Society of Ulsoor in Bangalore sent an invitation to the Swami to come there and deliver a course of lectures. The Swami accepted the invitation and a splendid reception was given to him. About four thousand people including fifty-three Bhajan (devotional music) parties received him at the station and conducted him in a huge procession to his place of residence. He stayed in Bangalore for three weeks. During this period he delivered about a dozen public lectures and held conversation morning and evening. His lectures were attended by a large number of eager and enthusiastic people, and his classes were also equally popular. The Swami was in one of his great spiritual moods during this whole period and electrified his audiences, as it were, illuminating them with a new and forceful understanding of religion. The dry bones of religion identified with mechanical observances became living at the touch of his inspiration, and a strong wave of spirituality passed through the city.

In the same year the Swami carried the message of the Master to Mysore and delivered there a

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

series of five lectures. A noteworthy address was given in Sanskrit to the Pandits of the place assembled in the local Sanskrit College. In this the Swami rose to the height of his eloquence and clearly showed how the message of his Master harmonised the interpretations of the Vedanta by different Acharyas. It was very bold of the Swami to do that, for the Sanskrit scholars of the South, strong champions of orthodoxy as they were, could hardly believe in anything outside the particular system of philosophy they followed.

The interest created by the Swami in Bangalore was kept up by the Vedanta Society. In the following year the Swami was again invited to go to Bangalore, this time to open a permanent centre. He delivered a series of lectures, opened some classes and left a junior Swami in charge of them to continue the work, and went back to Madras.

In August, 1906, the Swami again visited Bangalore and Mysore with his brother-disciple Swami Abhedananda, who had recently come from America. The two Swamis together delivered several lectures and consolidated the Vedanta work in Mysore. During this visit the foundation-stone of the Bangalore Ashrama was laid. After the building was constructed, Swami Ramakrishnananda invited Swami Brahmananda, the President of the Mission, to open it. The presence of Swami Brahmananda created a great stir in the city, and the people thought it a blessed privilege to have in their midst one whom

SWAMI RAMAKRISHNANANDA

Sri Ramakrishna had looked upon as his spiritual son. Afterwards Swami Ramakrishnananda would visit Bangalore whenever he could snatch away time from his busy life, and he actively managed the Ashrama and the Mission work in Bangalore and Mysore. Swami Ramakrishnananda also visited Trivandrum and spent about a month there creating enthusiasm in the minds of the people. The Swami made extensive tours to several parts of South India and as a result of that centres were started in other different places.

His fame as a teacher of Vedanta spread far and wide. Even such distant places as Burma and Bombay sent invitations to him. He visited those places and achieved great success. It is astonishing how the Swami, who was deeply absorbed in acts of worship and might be taken to be a medieval saint living again in the present century, could throw himself into a whirlpool of public activities and spread his influence over the most modern minds. Most of his students were persons with high English education and some of them afterwards rose to very eminent positions in the Presidency. The Swami was a wonderful combination of the East and the West, and in him was reflected the Vedic culture of ancient India in the light of modern thought.

Some of the discourses he delivered in various places have been published in book form. They now furnish spiritual sustenance to innumerable people who had not the opportunity to come into direct contact with him. Of these books *The Universe and Man* and *The Soul of Man* give

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

lucid expositions of some of the fundamental principles of Vedanta. *Sri Krishna, the Pastoral and King-maker* is, as the title shows, the life of that great Divinity on earth and is a study of the hero as God-man.

Swami Ramakrishnananda was not a very eloquent speaker. There was no oratorical flourish, (which is sometimes an attempt to hide shallowness of thought and absence of sincere feeling) in his speech. But his sincerity and thorough grasp of spiritual realities made his speech very impressive. He was always at his best in the conversational method of teaching. A student who had the privilege of very often attending his classes and lectures writes: "His method of teaching was unique. It was more or less conversational instead of being stiff or formal, and it appealed directly to the heart owing to the sincerity with which it was uttered. Time flew past; minutes grew into hours; but we who were listening to his sublime discourses, were enjoying supreme happiness and felt not how time flew away. Great truths, complicated questions, controversial problems and all the heights and depths of ethics were discussed, but in the most simple manner possible so that even a child might understand them. He had the great knack of disentangling the truth from the unnecessary details in which it remains shrouded and thus of presenting it in all its aspects to the amazement of the audience. For, as he taught us to perceive old truths in a new light, we thought we were

SWAMI RAMAKRISHNANANDA

under the influence of one who talked not like the scribes, but like one with authority."

In day-to-day dealings the Swami was full of overflowing love. We have seen how at the Baranagore monastery he was "like a mother" to all, taking extreme care of them. When any brother-disciple came to the South on pilgrimage, Swami Ramakrishnananda would be beside himself with joy, and did not know how sufficiently to take care of him. When Swami Brahmananda visited the South, all Swami Ramakrishnananda's feelings welled forth, as it were, and there was nothing he would not do for him. He felt that he had God in human form, as it were, as his guest. Of course his attitude towards Swami Brahmananda was of an exceptional character, and it was the logical outcome of his devotion to the Master. Because Sri Ramakrishna loved Swami Brahmananda so much, the attitude of Swami Ramakrishnananda towards him was more of reverence than of brotherly love. It was a sight to see Swami Ramakrishnananda, with his bulky body, prostrate before his great brother-disciple in all humility. A similar attitude could be seen in the Swami, though in a more intense degree, when the Holy Mother with a party of women devotees came to the South on pilgrimage. It is said that on this occasion he worked so hard to remove even the slightest inconvenience that might befall the party, that his health permanently broke down.

It was due to this great heart of the Swami

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

that the Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home in Madras was originally started. At Coimbatore he once saw how all the members of a family except a few helpless children had been swept away by plague. The pitiable condition of these poor children left alone was too much for the loving heart of the Swami, so he took charge of them. The care of these few boys was the cause of the genesis of the school which has since then grown to be one of the most important institutions in the whole of the Southern Presidency.

As a teacher the Swami cared more for building up lives than for reaching a wide circle of indifferent auditors. He was a strict disciplinarian and insisted on all who came under his influence being perfect and exemplary in every detail of their conduct. Once a student was found sitting in his class with his chin resting on the palm of his hand. He at once said: "Do not sit like that, it is a pensive attitude. You should always cultivate a cheerful attitude." Sometimes thoughtless visitors to the Math would take out the daily paper and begin to read. The Swami would at once administer a mild rebuke saying: "Put away your paper. You can read that anywhere. When you come here you should think of God." Once a proud and vainglorious Pandit came to the Math and began to talk of his plans for reforming temples, society, etc. Swami Ramakrishnananda listened to him quietly for some time and then opened his lips to remark, "I wonder what God did before you were born." The man at once became silent, and the

SWAMI RAMAKRISHNANANDA

conversation turned to healthier things. The man afterwards left the Math with a better attitude of mind. Once Swami Ramakrishnananda and an American devotee were putting up in the royal guest quarters at Bangalore as the guests of the Maharaja of Mysore. One day a member of the Maharaja's official staff came to see them. The visitor began to detail some court gossip to the American devotee thinking that that would be a very entertaining topic of conversation. All the while that the conversation was going on, the Swami shifted his position in his chair again and again showing evident signs of great discomfort. When asked if he was feeling unwell, the Swami unsophistically said, "I am all right, but I do not like your conversation." The visitor, however, took the rebuke without any offence and changed the subject of conversation.

His own life was extremely disciplined. He was very regular and punctual in his habits. He would follow his self-imposed daily duties under any circumstances. As a rule he began the day by reading the Gita and *Vishnu-Sahasranama*. Once the Swami passed the night outside the Math, to keep company with Swami Premananda, when the latter was on pilgrimage in the South. That night Swami Ramakrishnananda had not with him the Gita and *Vishnu-Sahasranama*. When he discovered this he sent some one out to procure copies of those two books so that he might not miss reading them next morning.

The Swami was extremely fastidious in his selection of recruits to be admitted to the Math.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

He was not for allowing a religious dilettante or a half-hearted aspirant to join the Order. The candidate must fully satisfy the tests before he could be allowed to embrace the life of renunciation.

The young novitiates who came to receive training under him had a very hard time of it. For, any carelessness in their conduct called forth a sharp rebuke from the Swami. He was particular that the young recruits should regulate their lives in such a way that they could easily reach the Ideal for which they came. And certainly carelessness or absent-mindedness has no room in such aspirations. He was specially hard on those who were in any way self-conscious or had any feeling of egotism. Himself an amazing example of complete self-effacement he could not stand any idea of egotism in one who aspired after God-realisation.

All this need not give one the impression that the Swami was only stern. Stern he certainly was when occasion demanded; but his sternness was only surface deep. At heart he was extremely soft and kind. Once when the time came for the departure of a junior Swami of the Order who had come to Madras, Swami Ramakrishnananda fed him well sitting by him and actually burst into tears when the latter was about to leave. Another time Swami Ramakrishnananda had gone to Bengal and when he visited Calcutta he learnt that a young Brahmacharin of the Order who had for some time lived with him at Madras was lying ill at his parental

SWAMI RAMAKRISHNANANDA

home in the city. The Swami himself went to see the patient at his home. At this the Brahma-charin was dumbfounded. That Swami Ramakrishnananda who was held in such high esteem throughout the country should come to his bedside! He could hardly believe his eyes.

It was his love for humanity that impelled him to work so hard in Madras. Had not the leader said that one's own salvation lay in finding salvation for others? So he gave himself up unreservedly to the service of others. From day to day, month to month and year to year, he followed the same routine of hard work. People wondered how he could do so much work single-handed. After some time the body gave indication that it could no longer stand the stress of so much hard work. But the spirit was there. The Swami did not listen to the whisper of the flesh. In spite of his indifferent health he carried on his hard labour till the body completely broke down and the doctors diagnosed the disease as consumption.

Word was sent to Calcutta and his fellow-monks begged him to pass his last days with them. This he felt was best. He had thought of it, but not until the command came from the President of the Mission did he leave Madras. He was housed at the monastery in Baghbazar and the most noted physicians visited him of their own accord. But his condition grew worse.

Most remarkable, however, was the strength of his spirit which burst forth in eloquent discourses concerning high spiritual matters, even

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

whilst the body suffered most. One who loved him dearly, hearing him speak with this distressed state of body asked him to desist. "Why?" came the reply, "When I speak of the Lord all pain leaves me, I forget the body." Even in delirium his mind and his voice were given to God. "Durga, Durga," "Shiva, Shiva," and the name of his Master were ever on his lips. His great esteem and his love for Christ, which was manifested throughout his lifetime, revived constantly in those days. Speaking of Jesus he would become eloquent. He would tell of how Sri Ramakrishna had regarded Christ and of how, when his Master during Samadhi had had the vision of Christ, the very body of the great founder of Christianity had entered into that of his own.

As the days passed and his condition grew worse, the monks knew the time for Mahasamadhi, or supreme realisation, was at hand. Several days more—then the body lay forsaken by the soul. At that moment the Presence of the Lord was felt. The death-chamber had become a tabernacle, it had become the temple of illumination.

Swami Ramakrishnananda entered into Final Realisation on August 21, 1911. A great pillar of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission had fallen. The Swami worked for only fourteen years, in Madras. But he worked so intensely and so great was the force of his spiritual personality that the seed he sowed has grown into a tremendous tree, and is still in the process of growing.

SWAMI RAMAKRISHNANANDA

Now the number of persons in South India who are interested in the message of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda is legion. But they all recall with feelings of deep gratitude not unmixed with blessed pride that Swami Ramakrishnananda once lived in the place where they have been born. Did not the Swami sacrifice his life for them !

VII

SWAMI TRIGUNATITANANDA

The family name of Swami Trigunatitananda, or Swami Trigunatita as he was usually called, was Sarada Prasanna Mitra. He was born in an aristocratic family of Twenty-four Perganas on January 30 in 1865. His parents believed that Sarada was born to them through the grace of the Divine Mother Durga, and therefore they named the child after Her.

For education Sarada was sent to Calcutta. As a student he showed great brilliance, and by his charming behaviour and sweet manners he endeared himself to all. While a boy of fourteen he appeared for the Entrance Examination from the Metropolitan Institution of Shyampukur where Mahendra Nath Gupta or M., the great devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, was the headmaster. Everybody expected that Sarada would pass the examination with great distinction and win prizes and scholarships, but fate was against him. Sarada lost his gold watch on the second day of the examination through some carelessness. This so much upset him that he could no longer normally write examination papers, and he passed in the second division to the great disappointment of all. This made Sarada so grief-stricken, that for weeks together he kept sorrowing over his lot.

SWAMI TRIGUNATITANANDA

M. loved Sarada dearly. Finding his favourite boy so much depressed in spirits, he one day took Sarada to Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar. Thus a trifling thing like the loss of a gold watch became the indirect cause of great future events. A pure soul like Sarada was at once attracted towards the saint of Dakshineswar, and he began to go to him whenever he could make time.

From his very boyhood Sarada showed a rare religious disposition and found delight in worship etc. In this he was greatly helped by his father who spent the greater portion of his day in spiritual practices. Sarada began to read scriptures, and so retentive was his memory that even at an early age he learnt by heart more than a hundred Sanskrit hymns. The contact with Sri Ramakrishna further stimulated his religious spirit, and Sri Ramakrishna also kept keen eyes on the training of his boy devotee.

Brought up in the atmosphere of an aristocratic family, Sarada looked upon some works as reserved only for menials. But one hot day when Sarada had gone to Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna asked the boy to bring water and wash his feet. There were many friends of Sarada standing near, which made the situation all the more embarrassing. Sarada's face became flushed with a sense of humiliation. He did not know what to do. But Sri Ramakrishna definitely asked him again to do the work. There was no other way. Sarada willynilly obeyed Sri Ramakrishna. But this incident for ever broke

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

down the feeling of aristocracy in the innocent boy and implanted in him a spirit of service.

Sarada now joined the Metropolitan College. In the first year he prosecuted his studies regularly and acquired a name as a bright student, but as his visits to Sri Ramakrishna became more and more frequent, Sarada began to show growing indifference to secular learning. Spiritual hankering now possessed his soul, and this got the better of his love for worldly things. The parents of Sarada became alarmed at this attitude of his mind. They thought marriage might give a turn to his mind, and without his knowledge made all arrangements for that. But as soon as Sarada got the scent of this, he fled away from the house.

He first went to see Sri Ramakrishna and told him of his plan to go to Puri, carefully suppressing the fact that he had left the house without the knowledge of his parents. On the way to Puri he had varied experiences. Once for two days he was without food. Hungry and tired he walked on. He thought he would find some village in the evening. But to his utter dismay he found himself in a deep forest, and deeper became the forest as he advanced. In that helpless condition he took shelter in the branches of a tree for the night. But when he was asleep, he was called by a stranger and given food. In the morning Sarada searched the whole forest, but as he saw no human habitation in it, he was at a loss to find wherefrom had come the stranger who had befriended him in the night.

SWAMI TRIGUNATITANANDA

His parents, however, made their way to Puri and caught him. Sarada was brought back home. There was only one month more before the First Arts Examination. Though Sarada had been out of touch with his books for almost the whole year, with only one month's preparation he passed the examination creditably.

Sarada again showed indifference to worldly things. Now and then he began to absent himself from the house. He actually wanted to give up the world, but the thought of the shock to his parents deterred him from his purpose.

To change the mind of Sarada by some supernatural means, his elder brother performed a sacrificial ceremony lasting for about a month and a half and costing a huge sum of money. At the end of the ceremony, however, the priests declared that the mind of Sarada would be difficult to change: he was destined to be a Sannyasin. Never daunted this brother of Sarada tried various other means to put obstacles in the path of his renunciation. But as everything failed, he frankly prayed to the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna to persuade Sarada to take to a worldly life. When Sarada knew all these things, he got annoyed and almost stopped going home.

Sarada was one of those young disciples who threw themselves heart and soul into the service of Sri Ramakrishna during his illness at Cossipore. After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, when the Math at Baranagore was established, Sarada joined it. But here he would also sometimes be disturbed by his relations, and once

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

made an unsuccessful attempt to fly away. At this Math the young disciples of Sri Ramakrishna took Sannyasa ceremonially and changed their old names. Sarada was named Swami Trigunatitananda.

Swami Trigunatita had always a great hankering for places of pilgrimage, but his love for Swami Vivekananda kept him confined to the Baranagore Math. At last in 1891 he actually started on a pilgrimage. He visited Vrindavan, Muttra, Jeypore, Ajmere and went to Kathiawar. At Porbandar in Kathiawar he unexpectedly met Swami Vivekananda, who during that time wanted to keep his whereabouts secret from his brother-disciples. After visiting some other places on the way, Swami Trigunatita returned to Baranagore.

Some years afterwards, in 1895, Swami Trigunatita again started on pilgrimage—this time for Kailas and Manasarovar. It was the most difficult pilgrimage one could undertake. Swami Trigunatita's indomitable spirit carried him through. It was the month of June or July. Snow had just begun to melt. The beautiful natural scenery which he saw there amply repaid the hardship which he had undergone in that difficult journey.

Swami Trigunatita had a very daring and adventurous spirit. On more than one occasion his life was in danger in the course of the pilgrimages he performed. But every time he was very mysteriously saved. These experiences deepened his faith in God all the more.

SWAMI TRIGUNATITANANDA

After finishing the pilgrimages he stayed in Calcutta for some time at the house of a devotee and spent his time in deep studies. Perhaps due to a too sedentary occupation, he developed a fistula which required surgical operation. The doctor came, but the Swami would not subject himself to chloroform. The operation continued for full half an hour and the incision was about six inches deep, but the Swami stood it calmly without the least betrayal of any sign of pain.

As soon as he recovered, he again plunged himself into studies. He was buried in books or remained absorbed in doing some literary work. Occasionally he would take scriptural classes at different places.

After some time the Swami went to stay in the monastery at Alambazar. There also he carried with him his habit of study. His room was packed with books with which he would be found constantly busy.

During this period he started three centres in Calcutta for the training of students. But the plan had to be given up after some time.

In 1897 when the district of Dinajpur was in the grip of a terrible famine, the Swami went there and organised relief work. On this occasion his wonderful spirit of service was in evidence. Himself living on "Bhiksha" or sometimes on scanty or no meals, he laboured day and night in distributing food to the starving population.

Swami Trigunatita had a strange capacity as regards food. He could live for days together with only one piece of fruit for his daily meal.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

And if he liked he could eat the quantity of food which it would take four strongly built persons to consume. Having this capacity, he would sometimes in fun bewilder or embarrass his friends. Once on one of his pilgrimages he went to a hotel for his meal. But he began to eat so much that the poor hotel-keeper had to approach and request him with folded hands to stop taking further food, and said that he would not charge the Swami anything for what he had already taken. In later days the Swami greatly enjoyed narrating this incident.

A few days after the Ramakrishna Math had been transferred from Alambazar to a rented house near the present site of Belur Math, Swami Vivekananda one day expressed his desire of starting a Bengali journal as a vehicle of spreading the teachings of Vedanta and the universal message of Sri Ramakrishna. For this a press was bought and Swami Trigunatita was put in charge of the whole thing: he was the editor of the paper, the manager of the press, and as a matter of fact, everything. To organise the publication of the paper, which Swami Vivekananda named "*Udbodhan*," Swami Trigunatita had to undergo Herculean labour. He did not care about his daily meal, he did not care about his physical comfort or illness, the *Udbodhan* became the one absorbing interest of his life. When Swami Vivekananda heard of the labour and hardship which Swami Trigunatita was passing through, he is said to have remarked that such an amount of work and hardship was

SWAMI TRIGUNATITANANDA

possible only for a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna who lived only for the good of humanity.

Though Swami Trigunatita was killing himself, as it were, in the work of the *Udbodhan*, whenever he heard of anybody being ill, he was sure to be by his bedside. In fact, no work would give greater delight to the Swami than serving others. It is said that once an employee of the *Udbodhan* Press was attacked with cholera. Swami Trigunatita made all arrangements for his treatment and himself attended the case constantly. The poor servant was dumbfounded at the conduct of the Swami: could he believe his eyes that a master was doing so much for a paid hand!

As a result of the vigilant care and ceaseless industry of Swami Trigunatita the *Udbodhan* was well established. At this time Swami Vivekananda asked him to go to San Francisco in America to replace Swami Turiyananda who was returning to India. Swami Trigunatita was ready to obey any command of the leader, Swami Vivekananda, and he agreed to go to the West howevermuch it might interfere with his Indian mode of living. But unfortunately Swami Vivekananda passed away unexpectedly on July 4, 1902, to the great grief of all his brother-disciples. Swami Trigunatita, however, sailed for America *via* the Pacific, a few months after this sad event, and reached San Francisco on January 2, 1903. The matter of dress for the new country he settled by going in oriental costume. As regards the question of food, he

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

determined to maintain a strict vegetarian diet, and not being able to get accurate information as to the vegetables and fruits grown in America, he started on his voyage with the resolution to live, if necessary, on bread and water. He afterwards found, of course, that vegetables and cereals of all kinds are grown in America in great abundance, but he went prepared to undergo any privation in his zeal for the cause.

When the Swami arrived in San Francisco there was a group of loyal friends and students of Vedanta to greet him, and he was taken at once to the home of Dr. M. H. Logan, the President of the San Francisco Vedanta Society. A few weeks later he went to the home of Mr. and Mrs. C. F. Peterson where he was to make his headquarters. At once old and new students of Vedanta began to come from all directions. The news that another Swami, again a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, had come to take up the work, spread far and wide and very soon the Swami's time was filled to overflowing.

Classes were organised and a hall secured where lectures were given on Sunday afternoons. The home of the Petersons soon proved too small for the large attendance at the classes, and the decision was made to find more commodious quarters. A flat was taken in March, 1903, giving larger space for the classes and lectures. Classes were regularly held on Monday and Thursday evenings for members: the study of the Gita on Monday evenings, and Upanishads on Thursday

SWAMI TRIGUNATITANANDA

evenings, with morning and evening lectures on Sundays.

In the year 1904, in response to calls the Swami found a fertile field for work in the city of Los Angeles in Southern California, 425 miles from San Francisco. But after organising classes there, he found ■ difficulty in carrying on the work at that distance; so in the same year he wrote to India for an assistant Swami to take charge of that work. The Swami who came to take up the new work was compelled to return to India for reasons of health at the end of the year.

In 1904 the work had grown to such proportions that Swami Trigunatita felt the time had come when the Vedanta Society of San Francisco should have a building of its own. With Swami Trigunatita to think was to act, and a committee was at once appointed to look for a suitable site. Soon a meeting of all the members was called, the funds were quickly raised and a plot of land was purchased in the name of the San Francisco Vedanta Society. Plans were immediately commenced for the building under the supervision of the Swami, and at last took form in what was to be known as the first Hindu Temple in the whole Western world. The call for subscriptions went out and almost without exception the entire membership, with many friends of the movement, responded. Rich and poor, old and young, came with their offerings and before long sufficient funds were subscribed to commence operations. In the month of August, 1905, with appropriate ceremonies, the corner-stone was laid. Here at

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

last, in San Francisco, the city beside the Golden Gate, a permanent centre was established, a channel through which the Truth could flow to quench the thirst of thousands of world-weary souls with its life-giving waters. With regard to the future of the Temple, the Swami said, "Believe me, believe me, if there is the least tinge of selfishness in building this Temple it will fall, but if it is the Master's work it will stand."

The Temple was dedicated to the cause of humanity on January 7, 1906, and the first services were held on Sunday, January 15.

Shortly after this, an idea of starting a monastery in connection with the Vedanta Society occurred to him. There were a number of young men attending the lectures and meetings of the Society who had an inclination to live the life of Brahmacharins. About ten of them became the inmates of the monastery. This number was added to occasionally but the new-comers were not always permanent and the number remained at an average of ten. The young men were all engaged in various occupations and continued to earn their own living, contributing according to their abilities their share of the expenses of the monastery upkeep, until such time as they might either desire or were ready in the Swami's judgment to take the vows of Brahmacharya.

These young men were subjected to strict discipline. They had to rise early in the morning, meditate regularly and do all household duties such as cleaning, sweeping, etc. The Swami instructed them that all work connected with the

SWAMI TRIGUNATITANANDA

Temple was holy and if performed in the right spirit would purify their minds and advance their meditation.

The Swami was fond of forceful maxims. When some one recited the great watchword of the American Republic, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty," he made him repeat it. Some of the mottoes hanging in every room of the monastery were: "Live like a hermit but work like a horse"; "Do it now"; "Watch and pray"; and one which he constantly quoted, "Do or die, but you will not die."

The Swami thoroughly believed in singing as a spiritual exercise. In the early morning he often took the young men up on the roof of the monastery to sing devotional hymns and chants. Half a mile distant was the bay of San Francisco, and sometimes the Swami took them thither for the morning singing and meditation. At that early hour none were astir except the fishermen in their motor boats and an occasional ship putting out to sea. Usually the air was calm and still, and, as the voices rolled out over the waters of the wide bay, it must have been a source of wonder to the listening sailors and fishermen.

The Swami's life was an example to others in every respect. His life was under the continuous scrutiny of some of the young men for purity of mind and any motives of worldliness. There were those who never questioned, but there were some doubters, or unwilling believers, and these were eventually satisfied. For all that they found in his character was the one consuming purpose

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

to give his life for the salvation of others, and that all of his undertakings were only means to that end. A great disciplinarian of the highest order, his was the brightest example of what a disciplined life should be. He ever maintained his Sannyasin life and notwithstanding his various ailments, insisted on sleeping on the floor of his office, a light mattress being the only concession he would make to the entreaties of those concerned for his health and comfort. In addition to his unceasing daily labours, the Swami cooked all the meals for the monastery so that the young men might eat pure, Sattvika food, so very essential for the growth of spiritual life. Always to bed later than the others, he was yet the first to rise. This he did not for a day or a month, but from year to year. He was the model of punctuality and regularity. This discipline in punctuality was all the more remarkable when it is remembered that, in the first place, it was not natural to him, and in the second place, his mendicant life aimed at destroying the very idea of time itself. Seeing, however, the value of the virtue of punctuality in the character and lives of spiritual aspirants, he bent his will to be punctual himself and then required it of his disciples.

Consequences never deterred him. To the genuine disciple he would say: "I don't mind if I break every bone in your body, so long as I can drag you up to the shores of the Ocean of Immortality and throw you in; then my work will be finished."

SWAMI TRIGUNATITANANDA

Sometimes young men came to the Swami expressing their desires to live the ascetic life under discipline. Some had read the lives of saints and in their mind's eye was the picture of a monk's cell with its association of many forms of asceticism. To such the Swami suggested they should first spend a few months in the Temple monastery as a preparation for the solitary life. They were then assigned sleeping quarters, usually in the same room with others, and subjected to the limitations of privacy which such close contact brought. This was the first step in discipline as nearly all were accustomed to sleeping in a room alone. Then to their surprise, they sat down at least twice daily to wholesome and substantial meals. Nothing seemed to accord with their idea of asceticism. After two or three months they discovered that some of the hardest discipline lies in the conquest of the ego under the constant friction of this daily association. Some would make complaints of others to the Swami. He would reply, "Did you not ask for discipline?" "Yes," they would answer, "but not that kind," and then would leave the monastery. Those who endured and made the best of everything, conquered themselves and learnt the true spirit of service to others. Some of them afterwards looked back on the years of their monastery life as among their most delightful memories.

The life of the Swami was one long sacrifice and those who were privileged to be in his presence found their doubts and troubles melt

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

away like snow before the sun. He veritably radiated holiness for he ever lived in the consciousness of the Divine Mother. Every moment of contact with him was one of increasing education, conscious and unconscious.

From the year 1913, one by one, by death and other reasons, the monastery membership began to diminish until only a few remained and the monastery was finally closed with the death of Swami Trigunatita himself.

The Swami also started a nunnery as a separate community at the earnest entreaties of some women disciples who wanted to live a life of discipline under the personal spiritual instruction of the Swami. The women disciples were full of earnest zeal and lived the life most sincerely. They did all their cooking and household work in the spirit of worship and service to humanity and faithfully adhered to the rules laid down by the Swami as regards eating, hours of rising and general spiritual conduct. They worked hard but were happy at the thought that they were working out their salvation for the ultimate goal of realisation and freedom. The Swami's hope was that the nunnery might be the seed of an awaking spiritual life among the women of America and that great results might accrue from its apparently small beginning.

In 1909 the Swami started a monthly magazine, called *Voice of Freedom*, as a channel through which to reach many souls who either did not attend his lectures or who were too far away to come to them. The magazine ever and always

SWAMI TRIGUNATITANANDA

held constant to the high ideals of the truths of the Vedanta philosophy and the variety of materials published soon attracted a wide circle of readers. Soon the *Voice of Freedom* was an established success with a growing list of interested friends and subscribers. The magazine continued for seven years, after which period it was stopped to the disappointment of many Vedanta students.

Every year the Swami would lead a selected group of students to "Shanti Ashrama"—a peace retreat in the San Antone Valley, eighteen miles south-east of Mt. Hamilton, California, the site of the world-famous Lick Observatory. Situated at a picturesque spot, sparsely wooded with oaks and chaparal, with ranges of brush-covered hills on either side and the perpetually snowy high Sierra Nevada Mountains in the far distance, removed from crowds and cities, the Shanti Ashrama, as named by Swami Turiyananda, the founder of the Ashrama, was an ideal spot for spiritual culture. It reminded one of the ancient Ashramas of the Indian Rishis in the Himalayas, and the very atmosphere of the place was spiritually invigorating. Here one could feel by far the most spiritual influence of the Swami. In that quiet atmosphere, far away from the distractions of town life, one could see more visibly how the Swami's life was the expression of the highest spirituality. Practically the whole day—from 3-45 in the morning when everyone was to get up till 10 in the night when lights were out—the inmates were busy

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

meditating, attending scriptural class, listening to discourses, and so on. Even eating was regarded as one of the most important functions of the spiritual life, and the Swami devoted the meal-times to chanting, instruction and spiritual reading, himself taking his own meals apart from the class.

One day a week was set apart as a day of individual solitude and fasting, as a voluntary asceticism. All who participated retired to their cabins where they could spend the entire twenty-four hours in meditation or other spiritual practices. To some, in that holy place, there came revelations and experiences in the twenty-four hours which silenced doubts, satisfied anxious longings and gave new impetus to their spiritual aspirations. The minds of all, however, seemed to be like an open book to the Swami, and individuals found that their inmost motives and actions had become known to him, and more than one was thus sometimes checked in rash impulses and extremes of conduct. Others, during the time of meditation, received spiritual visions and felt themselves translated into a different world. Sometimes on the nights of the full moon, the Swami held what might be called a Dhuni (fire) ceremony, when under the open sky round a fire the students would sit and spend the whole night in spiritual practices. That was one of the valuable experiences for every student.

In order to relieve any strain that might result from a diet of too great seriousness, the Swami

SWAMI TRIGUNATITANANDA

declared two afternoons a week as holidays, and a stream of genuine fun and merriment followed. The Swami himself was the leader in the fun.

Those who were privileged to attend the Shanti Ashrama classes could hardly forget their unique experience there; they found the desire ever recurring in their minds to renew their visits and spiritual inspiration.

How every act of the Swami was sanctified, surcharged with spiritual motives will be evidenced from the following instructions he gave to select students who were asked to do platform work in the Hindu Temple:

How to prepare one's own lesson or lecture for the Hindu Temple according to the law of application of Vedanta philosophy in practical life. That is, how to make even an evil good by application of Vedanta in daily life.

1. The lesson or the lecture is to be taken sincerely as a spiritual service and religious practice for one's own spiritual advancement.

2. The service consists of the following points:

(a) Sit in a sincere and prayerful mood.

(b) Make the mind blank. Drive off all the desires and thoughts of the secular side of the work, i.e., success or failure, praise or criticism, etc. Try hard to analyse your mind and search if there be any such desire hidden in any corner of your mind.

It is natural there will be some desire, without

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

doubt. Being sincere, one must be very faithful on this point of analysing one's mind and detecting the thieves.

(c) Meditate on God.

(d) Meditate on the subject of the lesson or the lecture.

(e) Then meditate on God and the subject for a few times—a minute or two for each. Then intensely think or meditate on the lesson or the subject of the lecture for a few minutes.

(f) Then offer the lesson or lecture as a sacred sacrifice to God very sincerely, with a view to having it sanctified by the grace of God, and ask God to save and cleanse you from all self-seeking.

(g) Meditate that the grace of God is being conferred on the subject of the lesson or lecture.

(h) See that it is being sanctified by His Divine touch. Smear the subject with His grace so that it is fully His—then take it from Him as an object of His grace.

(i) Bow down in the spirit of thankfulness to God for a few minutes and ask for His blessing.

3. This is the service part of the internal ceremony. Then comes the next step—how to prepare the lesson.

4. In the beginning never allow any such thought to enter your mind as consulting a dictionary or book of reference.

5. Now—for full half an hour meditate on the subject, then again fully offer the subject to God and try to unite it with God. Then, whatever you will get through the inspiration derived from

SWAMI TRIGUNATITANANDA

the meditation put down on a piece of paper. This is the beginning of the practice of self-culture in the methods of this kind of platform work.

6. Whenever you do not get any satisfactory point in the preparation of the lesson or the lecture, please do not neglect right away to sit and meditate on God instead of resorting to books of reference which are quite secular, after which you will follow the rules of preparation already given.

7. Finally—when you come on the platform to speak, remember that you are talking to God, God is the only audience.

The Swami would very often say, "That mind which is attached to more than one thing can never reach the goal." "Learn to see God in everything about you. Smear God over everything and your mind will think of Him alone."

The second year after the Swami's arrival in San Francisco, his health suffered from an attack of rheumatism and other physical troubles. The different climate, the new confining life due to his intense devotion to the work, all told upon a constitution weakened by the merciless rigours of early asceticism on the path to realisation. To one to whom the body had ceased to be the means to an end and was now only kept for the purpose of service to humanity, it was irksome to take proper precautions for its protection, and various ailments secured a foothold, resulting later in serious illness. As the years drew on, the Swami's ailments increased in number but he never allowed

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

them to interfere with his work. For the last five years of his life he suffered constantly, day and night, from chronic rheumatism and Bright's disease. So complicated were his physical troubles that he used to say, "This body is kept together only by the force of will, whenever I let go it will just fall to pieces of its own accord."

Notwithstanding this great handicap of ill-health he arose regularly at 4 A.M. daily and while meeting the demands of all his other duties he never failed to conduct the regular lectures and classes. If anything, his activities increased. So resolute and determined was his will that only a few knew the true condition of his health, but unmistakable signs began to appear showing that the body was yielding gradually to the heavy burdens imposed upon it. But alas, nobody knew that the end would come in an unexpected and tragic way!

In December, 1914, three days after Christmas, which had been celebrated with wonderful solemnity in the San Francisco Hindu Temple, Swami Trigunatita was holding a Sunday Service when a live bomb was thrown to the pulpit. It was the act of a young man, a former student of the Swami, who did it in a fit of depression and an unbalanced state of mind. Immediately there was an explosion, and a cloud of dense blue smoke obscured the platform. When the smoke cleared, it was found that the young man himself had been killed, and that the Swami had received severe injuries. It was immediately arranged to remove the Swami to a hospital. On his way to

SWAMI TRIGUNATITANANDA

the hospital the Swami said, "Where is X, poor fellow?" In the midst of excruciating pain his mind was yet filled with pity that anyone should do such a rash act.

Although medical skill did all it could, the shattered condition of the Swami's constitution, for years ready to disintegrate, was such that the system could not resist the infection from the wounds. Although every waking moment was one of intense suffering, no word of complaint ever passed his lips. From time to time he gave instructions to one disciple after another to be faithful to the cause to the end and, even to the last, his thoughts were never for himself but for the Master's work and mission.

On the afternoon of January 9, the Swami aroused himself out of an apparently unconscious state and in the course of the conversation with the young disciple in charge said that he would leave his body the next day, January 10, the birthday of Swami Vivekananda. Just before 7-30 P.M., on January 10, the young man was called out of the room for a few minutes, and when he returned the Swami had already left the body for that plane from which he had been attracted to earth by his Master to take up the work of the salvation of humanity.

Thus passed a great soul whose life was devoted to the spiritual unfoldment of man—a great Yogi and the servant of all. In what great esteem Swami Trigunatita was held in San Francisco could be judged from the large number of people who attended his funeral service. These were

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

not simply his students and disciples but represented many sections of society.

A son of Sri Ramakrishna sacrificed himself in ministering to the spiritual needs of the West. But the work which he began is spreading and expanding. The Vedanta Society of San Francisco is now an established and growing institution. Those who are associated with it can never forget the fact that they are reaping the fruits of labour undergone by Swami Trigunatita.



Swami Premananda

VIII

SWAMI PREMANANDA

Sri Ramakrishna used to say that a class of men appear in the world from time to time who spurn all the allurements of the world, its gold, its power, and its honour, and who bend all their efforts to the service of men, guiding their faltering steps to the door of the Divine. Because of the special manifestation of God in them, he would call them Ishwarakotis. He often referred to half a dozen among his disciples as of this class; and to this select group belonged Swami Premananda. Talent and greatness like cream do not always float on the top; oftentimes they lie hidden like gems in the dark caves of the sea. And though the aroma of this saint of angelic beauty and sweetness did not travel beyond a small circle of devotees and acquaintances, yet he occupies a place of great eminence among the children of Sri Ramakrishna.

Swami Premananda was born in 1861 in the prosperous and picturesque village of Antpur, in the district of Hooghly, Bengal. His parents came of two well-to-do and influential Kayastha families of the village. His father Taraprasanna Ghosh was a man of piety. He had inherited enough means to meet the demands of the family with ease and to conduct the daily service of the household deity, Sri Lakshminarayan Jiu.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Taraprasanna Ghosh was married to Matangini Dasi, daughter of Abhoy Chandra Mitra. Like her husband, she was also of devout disposition; and the husband and wife formed a happy pair.

The couple had ■ daughter and three sons. The daughter's name was Krishnabhamini, and the sons were called Tulsiram, Baburam and Shantiram. Of these Baburam came to be known in later life as Swami Premananda.

The marriage of Krishnabhamini with Balaram Bose of Calcutta brought Taraprasanna's family into close touch with Sri Ramakrishna some years later. Balaram Bose, who subsequently became one of the foremost householder disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, owned a big estate. But his interest was more in things spiritual than in the temporal affairs of life; and he spent most of his time in religious practices and studies. At his very first meeting with Sri Ramakrishna, the latter's penetrating gaze recognised him to be one of his inner circle of disciples. Balaram paid frequent visits to Sri Ramakrishna. Often he would take his wife and children with him. One day he took his mother-in-law also to Sri Ramakrishna. The devoted lady was highly pleased with the meeting and felt herself blessed by seeing him.

Born of pious parents, the boy had a natural slant towards spirituality. But blood cannot explain all the rich endowments native to the soul of young Baburam. A few memories of his childhood, accidentally preserved, acquire a great significance in the light of later events.

SWAMI PREMANANDA

Renunciation spoke through the broken accents of his childhood. When a mere stripling of a few summers, if anybody teased him about marriage, he would lisp out his protestations, "Oh, don't marry me, don't, don't; I will die then." His mates in the village school were drawn to this young cherub by the invisible tie of affection; they regarded him as their near and dear one. At eight years his ideal was to lead a life of renunciation with a fellow monk in a hut shut out from the public view by a thick wall of trees. Later on we shall see how correctly his boyish dreams anticipated future events. He loved to associate with holy men from the period of his adolescence. The sight of ascetics on the banks of the Ganges drew the comely boy to them; and in their company he would be unaware of the flight of time.

Passing out of the village school, Baburam came to Calcutta for higher studies. After joining the Aryan School for some time, he finally entered the Shyampukur Branch of the Metropolitan Institution. At this time Mahendra Nath Gupta, later the celebrated author of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and popularly known as M., happened to be the headmaster of the school. He had already come in contact with Sri Ramakrishna, and he used to visit the latter frequently. By another curious coincidence, Rakhal (later Swami Brahmananda) was also a student of the school and read in the same class as Baburam. The two boys quickly became drawn to each other by a hidden tie, and there soon sprang up

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

between them an intimate relationship which was only deepened with the passage of years. About this time Rakhal also came under the influence of Sri Ramakrishna and began visiting Dakshineswar now and then. These contacts with M. and Rakhal brought to Baburam's notice the holy personality of Sri Ramakrishna and opened up opportunities which led to an early acquaintance with him.

Baburam chanced to see Sri Ramakrishna for the first time in a Hari Sabha at Jorasanko, where the latter had gone to hear the chanting of the *Bhagavata*, though Baburam scarcely knew then that he had seen Sri Ramakrishna. He also heard about the Master from his elder brother. The latter told him about a monk at Dakshineswar, who, like Sri Gauranga, lost all consciousness of the world while uttering the name of God. On being asked if he would like to see the Sadhu, he agreed. Baburam knew that Rakhal was in the habit of visiting Dakshineswar frequently. Next day he asked his friend about the saint, and it was settled that on the following Saturday they should go together to see him. On the appointed day, after school hours, they set out by boat and were joined on the way by a friend named Ramdayal Chakravarti, who also used to visit Sri Ramakrishna. Rakhal inquired of Baburam if he would like to stay for the night. Baburam thought that they were going to a monk who lived in a hut, and replied, "Will there be accommodation for us?" Rakhal only said, "There may be." The question of food troubled

Baburam, and he asked, "What shall we eat at night?" Rakhal simply said, "We shall manage somehow."

At sunset they reached the temple of Dakshineswar. Baburam was fascinated with the beauty of the place which looked like fairyland. They entered Sri Ramakrishna's room, but he was not there. Rakhal asked them to wait and hurried to the temple. In a few minutes he was seen leading Sri Ramakrishna by the hand. The Master was in a state of God-intoxication, and Rakhal was carefully directing his staggering footsteps, warning him of the high and low places. Reaching his room he sat a while on the small bedstead and presently regained normal consciousness. He inquired about the new-comer. Ramdayal introduced Baburam. Sri Ramakrishna said: "Ah, you are a relative of Balaram! Then you are related to us also. What is your native place?"

Baburam: Antpur, sir.

Sri Ramakrishna: Ah, then I must have visited it. Kali and Bhulu of Jhamapukur also hail from that place, don't they?

Baburam: Yes, sir. But how do you know them?

Sri Ramakrishna: Why, they are sons of Ramprasad Mitra. When I was at Jhamapukur, I used to go frequently to their house as well as to that of Digambar Mitra.

Saying this Sri Ramakrishna caught hold of Baburam's hand and said, "Come closer to the light. Let me see your face." In the dim light of

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

an earthen lamp he carefully scrutinised his features. Satisfied with the results of the examination, he nodded his head in approbation. Next he examined the boy's arms and legs. Finally he said, "Let me see your palm." He looked at it and placed it upon his own as if to weigh it. Then he said, "All right, all right." Turning to Ramdayal he said: "Do you know how Naren is? I heard that he was a bit indisposed."

Ramdayal: I hear that he is well.

Sri Ramakrishna: He has not come here for a long time, and I feel a great longing to see him. Will you ask him to come here one day? You won't forget it?

Ramdayal: I shall ask him positively.

The night advanced. It was about ten o'clock. Ramdayal had brought a large quantity of food for Sri Ramakrishna who took only a part of it, arranging the rest to be distributed among the three devotees. Then Sri Ramakrishna asked them where they preferred to sleep—in his own room or outside. Rakhal chose inside, but Baburam thought that his presence might disturb the meditation of the saint. So he and Ramdayal preferred to sleep outside, though Sri Ramakrishna invited them to remain within.

The two devotees had already fallen asleep when they were roused by the cry of guards. Presently Sri Ramakrishna approached them reeling like a drunkard with his cloth under his arm. Addressing Ramdayal he said, "Hallo, are you asleep?" "No, sir," was the reply. Then Sri Ramakrishna said with great eagerness,

SWAMI PREMANANDA

"Please tell him to come. I felt as if somebody were wringing my heart like this,"—and he twisted his cloth. His every word and gesture expressed the unspeakable agony of heart at the separation from Narendra Nath. "What love!" thought Baburam, "But how queer that he does not respond?" Sri Ramakrishna proceeded a few steps towards his room. Then he returned and said to Ramdayal, "Then don't forget to tell him about it." He repeated these words and went back to his bed with staggering gait. About an hour after he appeared again and unburdened his mind to Ramdayal: "Look here, he is very pure. I look upon him as the manifestation of Narayana and can't live without him. His absence is wringing my heart like this," and he again twisted his cloth. Then he said in bitter anguish, "I am being put on the rack, as it were, for his sake. Let him come here just once." The scene was repeated at hourly intervals throughout the night.

When Baburam met Sri Ramakrishna next morning, he found him quite a different man. His face was calm like a sea after the storm, no anxiety lined his face. He asked Baburam to go round the Panchavati.

As he advanced towards the spot a strange sight greeted his eyes. The place looked so familiar and known. We know how his boyish imagination used to conjure up the vision of a hermit's life in future in a secluded spot shut out from the public gaze by a wall of trees. What was his astonishment when he found that the

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Panchavati tallied exactly with his dreams of boyhood ! How could he have foreshadowed the picture so accurately ? He, however, kept this to himself and returned to Sri Ramakrishna. In response to a question as to how he liked the place, he only said it was nice. The Master then asked him to visit the Kali temple, which he did. When he took leave of Sri Ramakrishna, the latter affectionately asked him to come again.

The visit left a deep impression on Baburam's mind. "He is an exceptionally good man," he thought, "and dearly loves Naren. But strange that Naren does not go to see him." The next Sunday at eight o'clock he again went to Dakshineswar. A few devotees were seated before the Master. Sri Ramakrishna welcomed him and said: "It is nice that you have come. Go to the Panchavati where they are having a picnic. And Narendra has come. Have a talk with him." At the Panchavati Baburam found Rakhal who introduced him to Narendra and some other young devotees of the Master who had assembled there. From the first Baburam was filled with admiration for Narendra. To look at him was to love him. Narendra was talking with his friends. Presently he burst into a song, which charmed Baburam. With bated breath he listened saying to himself, "Ah, how versatile he is !" In this way the Master helped the future bearers of his message to be bound by the intimate ties of love and affection.

This became the prelude to a closer association with Sri Ramakrishna, whose great love,

purity and holiness drew Baburam nearer and nearer to him as days went on. Slowly the knowledge began to dawn on Baburam that his relation with him was not of this life alone, but dated from a remote existence. In the personality of Sri Ramakrishna he discovered the realisation of the highest ideals of life, whose vague contours flitted across his mind in the dreams and phantasies of his boyhood. The indistinct promptings of the young heart were clearly articulated in Sri Ramakrishna. Before long, he surrendered himself at his feet for ever. The Master took the young disciple under the wings of his motherly care and began to teach the young fledgling in a thousand ways to soar to the heights of spiritual realisation.

Baburam was just twenty when he met Sri Ramakrishna, though he appeared to be much younger and very handsome. His character was untouched by the least blemish of the world. Indeed to the end of his days he maintained a childlike innocence and was unaware of the common erring ways of humanity. Sri Ramakrishna divined his absolute purity and held him very high in his estimation. In a vision he saw Baburam as a goddess with a necklace. This gave him an inkling as to the personality of this disciple. "It is a new vessel, and milk can be put into it without fear of turning,"—this was what he used to say of the boy. He would also say: "Baburam is pure to his very marrow. No impure thought can ever cross his mind and body."

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Owing to his absolute purity Baburam was deemed a fit attendant for Sri Ramakrishna, who liked to have him about. The inner group of disciples of Sri Ramakrishna began to come from 1879; from that time onward they began to take personal care of Sri Ramakrishna. Among them Rakhal and Latu attended on him continuously for a fairly long period. After a time Rakhal had to be away occasionally, so Sri Ramakrishna sometimes felt difficulty with regard to his personal care. There were others no doubt, but the Master could not bear the touch of all in all his moods. So one day he said to Baburam: "In this my condition, I cannot bear the touch of all. You stay here, then it will be very good." Baburam began to stay there now and then, though he did not dare to do so permanently, expecting trouble from home.

Closer association with the Master drove Baburam's mind inwards. Studies became insipid to him, and he began to neglect them. In 1883 or 1884 he appeared in the Entrance Examination and failed to get through. When Sri Ramakrishna heard about it he said, "So much the better; he has been released from bonds," playing a pun on the Bengali expression which sounds like the English word "pass" and means bondage. Baburam heaved a sigh of relief on hearing this.

The Master had not failed to notice that Baburam was neglecting his studies. To test the boy's mind he asked him one day: "Where are your books? Do you not mean to continue

your studies?" And then turning to Mahendra Nath Gupta, who was present, he said, "He wants to have both," and added, "very difficult is the path. What will a little knowledge avail? Just imagine Vashishtha being seized with grief at the loss of his son! Lakshmana was amazed at it and asked Rama the reason. Rama replied, 'Brother, there is nothing to wonder at. Whoever has knowledge has also ignorance. May you go beyond both.'" "I want just that," Baburam smilingly replied. Sri Ramakrishna said: "Well, is it possible to have that if you stick to both? If you want that then come away." Still smiling Baburam replied, "You please draw me away."

The Master no doubt wanted that Baburam should stay with him permanently. But he perceived that there might be trouble if he insisted on Baburam's doing so, therefore he passed by the topic saying: "You are weak-minded. You lack boldness. Just see how junior Naren says, 'I shall stay here and shall never go back.'" However, Sri Ramakrishna's desire to have Baburam with him always and thus to fashion his character came to be fulfilled a few days later in the following way. Baburam's mother had already become a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna. One day as she came to see Sri Ramakrishna, the latter requested her to leave her son with him. The mother was rather pleased and gave her ungrudging consent. She only asked that she might have devotion to God and that she might never live to suffer the bereavement

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

of her children. Her desires were fulfilled. From this time on Baburam began to live with the Master constantly. Sri Ramakrishna used to call him his *daradi*, i.e., the companion of his soul; so great was the love the Master bore towards him.

In later years Swami Premananda would often recount with tenderness the Master's great love for him. "Do I love you?" he would say addressing the young monks of the Math, "No, if I did I would have bound you for ever to me. Oh, how dearly the Master loved us! We do not even bear a hundredth of that love towards you. When I would fall asleep while fanning him at night, he would take me inside his mosquito net and make me sleep on his bed. When I would remonstrate with him saying that it would be sacrilegious for me to use his bed, he would reply, 'Outside, mosquitoes will bite you. I shall wake you up when necessary.''" The Master would often come to Calcutta to see Baburam and feed him, through his own hands, with sweets which he had brought from Dakshineswar. And often the intensity of the Master's affection made him cry out like a child when Baburam was away from him in Calcutta.

Sri Ramakrishna's love and sweet words began to mould the pliant soul of the young disciple. His life was the greatest teacher of all, and he taught in strange ways. One night Baburam was sleeping in the Master's room. After some time he was awakened by the sound of the Master's steps. Opening his eyes he found Sri

Ramakrishna pacing up and down the room in a state of trance with his cloth under his arm. A feeling of deep abhorrence was written on his features. With a face flushed with emotion, the Master was repeating vehemently, "Away with it! Away with it!" and praying, "O Mother, don't give me fame, Oh, don't Mother!" It appeared to the boy as if the Divine Mother was following Sri Ramakrishna with a quantity of fame in order to make a present of it to him and that Sri Ramakrishna was remonstrating with Her. The incident impressed the boy so profoundly that he conceived the uttermost hatred of fame for life.

The holy life of Sri Ramakrishna sharpened the boy's appetite for religious experiences. In Sri Ramakrishna's company he noticed that many went into ecstasies while hearing devotional songs, and he felt sad that he was denied such experiences. He pressed Sri Ramakrishna that he might also enjoy such states. At his importunities the Master prayed to the Divine Mother for his sake, but was told that Baburam would have knowledge (Jnana) instead of Bhava (ecstasies). This delighted the Master.

One day Hazra¹ in his characteristic way was advising Baburam and some other young boys to ask of Sri Ramakrishna something tangible in the shape of powers, instead of, as was their wont, merely living a jolly life with him with plenty of good things to eat. Sri Ramakrishna, who was

¹Pratap Chandra Hazra who used to live at Dakshineswar at that time.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

near, scented mischief-making and calling Baburam to his side said: "Well, what can you ask? Isn't everything that I have yours already? Yes, everything I have earned in the shape of realisations is for the sake of you all. So get rid of the idea of begging which alienates by creating distance. Rather realise your kinship to me and gain the key to all that treasure." In a hundred ways like this the Master, like a watchful mother, trained the young souls under his care so that they might develop without selfishness.

So passed a few happy years. In 1885 Sri Ramakrishna fell a victim to fatal cancer. At the end of the year he was removed to Cossipore garden for facilities of treatment. His protracted illness there till his passing away in August, 1886, laid the foundation of the vast organisation that the Ramakrishna Mission is to-day. Here assembled the young devotees of the Master to serve him in his illness. Allegiance to the common ideal and devotion to the Master linked them together in the indissoluble bonds of love. For a time after the Master had put aside his vesture of flesh the disciples were separated from one another. But the distractions of the work-a-day world failed to extinguish the fire of renunciation which was burning in their hearts. In a few months Narendra Nath (Swami Vivekananda), to whom Sri Ramakrishna had entrusted the care of his flock, brought them together in the Baranagore monastery—an old house, almost in ruins, rented by Surendra Nath Mitra, one of the householder disciples of Sri Ramakrishna.

SWAMI PREMANANDA

During the Christmas-tide of 1886 Narendra Nath took the young band to the ancestral place of Baburam at Antpur. Here they spent about a week in holy discourse and in intense meditation. The imagination of all took fire at Naren's eloquent portraiture of the glories of a life of renunciation, and they decided to take up the monk's bowl. On returning to Baranagore, Narendra performed an elaborate *Viraja Homa* and took formal initiation into Sannyasa along with his brother-disciples. Narendra gave Baburam the name of Premananda as he thought it conformed to the remark of Sri Ramakrishna that Sri Radha, the Goddess of Love, Herself was partially incarnated in him. Later years were to reveal how apt was this monastic name and what a great expanse of love lay hidden in that quiet personality.

At Baranagore, then at Alambazar, the little band passed days of hard austerities. On Swami Ramakrishnananda's departure to Madras to preach the message of the Master there, Swami Premananda took up the duties of the daily worship of the Master. Some time later he left for a pilgrimage in North India and returned on the eve of the removal of the monastery to Belur. Here he again resumed the daily worship of the Master.

A new chapter of his life opened with the passing away of Swami Vivekananda. One could hardly realise then what boundless love and tenderness, what compassion and sweetness, what leonine power and great fire lay hidden

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

within this meek and unobtrusive figure. The heavy responsibilities which came to rest on his shoulders gradually unfolded the beauty and richness of his personality. The task of looking after the affairs of the Mission had devolved on Swami Brahmananda. For this reason he had to travel in different parts of the country. So Swami Premananda was entrusted with the management of the Math at Belur. The daily service in the shrine, the training of the young Brahmacharins and Sannyasins, the various household duties of the monastery, the receiving of devotees and guests and instructing them on spiritual matters—all these crowded his hours with activities and left him little respite.

The father is reflected in the son. Some of Sri Ramakrishna's children specially recalled some aspects of the infinite excellences of the Master. Swami Premananda mirrored more than any one else the Master's all-consuming love for all. Monks, householders, devotees, visitors and guests, all felt the tenderness of his affection and came to regard him as the mother of the monastery. Like an indulgent mother, he sheltered under his protecting wings those whose perverse ways had alienated them from society. His sympathy unlocked in many of these lost souls of the world unsuspected springs of devotion and service.

A young man of Calcutta had strayed into evil paths under the influence of vicious company. An addict to intoxicants, he appeared to be heading towards utter ruin every day. The efforts of

SWAMI PREMANANDA

his friends and relatives to wean him away from his associates and habits came to naught. In the end they abandoned all hope in despair. Fortunately one of the relatives of the young man happened to be acquainted with Swami Premananda. He related everything to the Swami and begged his mercy. The Swami listened to everything patiently. He went to the boy's place one day and asked him to come to the Math. The boy came and enjoyed the day at the Math. As he was returning the Swami asked him to come again. The boy felt attracted to the Swami even at the first meeting and visited the Math several times. The alchemy of the Swami's love and kindness slowly transmuted the base metal of his character. "How strange!" he thought, "how could he bestow such tenderness and affection upon me who have been shunned even by my relatives and acquaintances in horror and shame. He knows all my misdeeds. No worldly ties bind me to him. No selfishness rules his affection. Yet how wonderful is his love!" Shortly afterwards he gave up the world and became heir to the life of renunciation and service. Through the Swami's ennobling influence many lives were transformed.

Drawn by the invisible bonds of the Swami's love and consideration, the devotees began to flock in larger numbers to the Math. A single meeting sufficed to create a lasting impression on their minds. The springs of action of great saints remain hidden from public gaze. The Swami's purity and devotion and the Master's

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

grace had lifted him to a plane of realisation where the service of man became transformed into the worship of God. The extreme care which the Swami took in receiving and entertaining the devotees betrayed to the dullest mind glimpses of his transformed outlook. None could leave the Math without being entertained. The visitors often turned up at odd hours, so the mid-day meal could not usually be served earlier than one or two in the afternoon. And sometimes it so happened that a group of devotees unexpectedly arrived from a distant place while the monks were resting their tired limbs late in the afternoon. Swami Premananda would then proceed alone in silence to the kitchen to cook food for them himself, as he did not want to trouble the boys in their rest. The young Sadhus, however, when they came to know of this, would hurry to the kitchen and do everything. The Swami was highly pleased with those who came forward. He used to encourage and bless them saying: "Well, the householders have to do a lot of things. Is it possible for them to come always at the proper time? And what can we do for them? We can only serve them and that costs us nothing but a little physical trouble. Through the Master's grace nothing is wanting here. Should we not be blessed by giving these things to his children?"

Concern for the devotees did not leave him even during his fatal illness. If anybody remonstrated with him for his anxiety lest it should affect his health, he would reply: "It's my

nature. The service of the devotee is the worship of God." A couple of days before he passed away, he called to his side a Sannyasin who looked after the management of the Math during his absence and asked him in a voice tender with emotion, "Could you possibly do one thing?" The Sannyasin replied, "Please tell me what I am to do." The Swami said, "Will you be able to serve the devotees?" "Yes, I shall," was the reply. "Don't forget, then," said the Swami almost imploring.

Standing on the adamant of faith, the Swami believed that everybody who chanced to partake of the food which had been offered to the Master was sure to put forth the sprout of spirituality at some future date. In his eyes persons who visited the Math had some special worth in them. He used to say: "How many are the places where people can seek pleasure! Some go to garden-houses, and others maybe to places of amusement. But those who come here, must, therefore, be understood to have some worth in them. Or why should they come at all?"

The Swami's ministrations did not end with entertainments of a merely physical nature. He was anxious above everything that the devotees should grow in spirituality. He would snatch a few moments from his crowded hours in order to infuse into their hearts a spirit of devotion to God and the ideal of detachment. His words, having their roots in love and untarnished by the slightest speck of egotism, would find their way direct into the sanctuary of the soul. He talked

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

to the visitors and the new-comers after they had rested for a while after the midday meal, and again after the evening service to those who happened to have stayed on. His one idea was to kindle the fire of devotion in them. When he spoke, an exalted feeling would take possession of their minds, and they would always experience a certain degree of spiritual uplift.

As the talk proceeded the Swami would invariably grow warmer. His face lit up with divine lustre, his voice aglow with animation, and his spirit aflame with fire, he appeared to be a being from a different world. As they listened to the torrent of his impassioned speech, they would often feel that the purity and the holiness of the Swami were impinging on their physical frames like the vibrations of a mighty dynamo.

During holidays and vacations students would sometimes come to spend a few days at the Math. Swami Premananda treated them as would a mother. He often wrote instructive letters to those who came in close contact with him. His words and influence spread into the hearts of many a young soul and tinged them with the dye of a noble idealism. A good many monks of the Ramakrishna Order to-day look back to his inspiration as the decisive influence on their lives. To him they owe a debt which they cannot repay.

The Swami's solicitude for the well-being of the novitiates in the monastery knew no bounds. With infinite patience he endeavoured not only to instil into them the supreme ideal of renunciation and service but also to train them in the

various practical duties of life. He aimed at an all-round development of abilities and disliked one-sidedness. He encouraged them to apply themselves to diverse tasks, and provided opportunities for the unfoldment of their manifold abilities. "You should learn," he would say, "how to work in every walk of life—be it service in the shrine, cooking in the kitchen, the tending of cows, or scavenging. Be they great or small, all works should receive your equal attention. Always take as much care of the means as of the ends." Though he would eye with disfavour the slightest indifference to work, he was quick to forgive and forget all remissness.

Great teacher as he was, he knew that the leader must be prepared to sacrifice and to set the example. He taught more by his actions than by precepts. One of his favourite sayings was that a leader (Sardar) must be ready to sacrifice his head (Sirdar). A remarkable incident reveals not only this trait of his character but also his breadth of vision free from the trammels of a conventional social code.

A Mohammedan gentleman from Diamond Harbour, in the district of Twenty-four Perganas, had one day come to the Math with a few Hindu friends. After he had visited the shrine, he was given some food on a few leaves. Everybody present showed some hesitation in taking away the leaves and cleaning the spot after the gentleman had partaken of the food from them. Noticing this Swami Premananda came forward and took them away to the great surprise and

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

discomfiture of all. A similar event also took place during his visit to East Bengal in 1917. A Mohammedan of a village in Mymensingh, where the Swami had gone, heard him speak of the one God who existed in all. Thereupon he asked the Swami if he could partake of the food touched by him. "Yes, I can," came the quick reply. Immediately some food was brought in a plate, and he partook of it from the hands of the Mohammedan without the least hesitation.

The management of the vast organisation with its members of diverse temperaments and natures made heavy demands on the Swami's endurance, patience and forgiveness. His spirit was more than equal to it. One day he revealed to a senior monk of the Order with what mind he proceeded to his daily duties. He said, "After finishing my meditation and Japa when I come down the stairs of the shrine, I utter again and again the Mantra of the Master—'Endure, endure, endure (sa, sha, sha),' one who endures abides, one who does not is ruined." Devoid of any trace of pride and egotism, he felt himself to be an instrument in the hands of the Master. His lofty spiritual vision had clothed the world with a divine light from which evil had taken its flight. In the errors of others he detected his own shortcomings. He wrote in several of his letters:

"This lesson I have learnt at the feet of the Master. When the boys do any wrong, I reason and find that they are not at fault. Whatever fault there is, is mine.

"I do not harbour the idea that I am good. I

have come to learn. There is no end to learning. May the Master give us right understanding—this is my prayer.

“By observing the faults of others we are gradually infected by them. We have not come to look at the faults of others and to correct them. But it is only to learn that we are here....

“Lord, Thou art everything. Whom should I scold? Everything is He; there is only a difference in the quantity of dust that covers the gold.”

Despite this meekness of spirit and humility, the Swami could be stern as well if it became necessary. But, it was only a chastisement behind which beat the affectionate heart of a mother. When sweet words and loving counsels fell on deaf ears, the Swami would not hesitate severely to reprimand the delinquents. It was, however, a rebuke which had no sting in it. And again like a loving mother he would make amends for this exhibition of sternness if it made the boys sulk. He would soothe them with affectionate words and offer them the best things to eat.

During his last illness at Deoghar, a devotee used to bring the best available things for the Swami's attendants to eat. One day he scolded one of the attendants for taking such things, saying: “The Master used to say that a Sadhu must restrain his greed and lust, and take only half a meal at night. But you are doing just the opposite out of greed.” The attendant felt hurt and left the place without anybody's knowledge.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

At the time of the midday meal the Swami noticed his absence and grew anxious. He suspected that the young man had taken his rebuke to heart and left the place. He sent out his other attendants to find him; but they failed. In the evening, while the Swami was sitting in a sad mood, the attendant entered the house by a back door. Coming to know of this he called him to his side and said: "My boy, I am old and weakened by illness. I cannot always keep my temper. Should you fly into a rage if I happen to say anything in this my condition?" As he said this, tears filled his eyes. And he brought some sweets and fed him with his own hands. Sometimes he would also explain his attitude to console the chastised.

The Swami laid great stress on the gentleness of behaviour. "Be gentle first," he would often repeat, "if you desire to be a Sadhu!" He regretted: "Nowadays none pays any attention to social and common good manners and gentle behaviour. The Master used to take extreme care to teach us these things." The Swami, by his eloquent and impassioned appeals, would firmly impress upon the novitiates the high ideals of the Master and of Swami Vivekananda. As he held vividly before their imagination the great renunciation of the Master, the keen thirst for God-realisation, the unheard-of devotion to truth, the strenuous religious practices and austerities, the wonderful realisations and profound love and kindness for the disciples, he would appear to be lifted out of the mundane

SWAMI PREMANANDA

plane and his words would electrify the audience. Thus he moulded the young minds in the cast of a new ideal.

In obedience to the command of Swami Vivekananda Swami Premananda did not to the end of his days make any personal disciples. Yet his eagerness to help all along the path of spirituality seemed beyond comparison. Every action of his betrayed his anxiety for the spiritual welfare of the young flock under his care and supervision. He kept a vigilant eye on the daily religious practices of the boys. He insisted on their spending regularly a fixed time on them. He would inquire into their difficulties and doubts and would buoy up their flagging enthusiasm with words of cheer and inspiration. He is even said to have imparted spiritual power to a young monk by a touch. Besides his own help, he used to send those who pressed him for initiation to the Holy Mother or to Swami Brahmananda and had them initiated by them.

It was Swami Vivekananda's dream that the Mission he founded should become the rallying point of a new revivalist spirit in India and that the monastery at Belur should become a great centre of learning from which would emanate noble and inspiring ideas. Swami Premananda made earnest efforts to realise an aspect of the Swamiji's dream, namely to convert the Math into a great centre of Sanskrit learning. Through his efforts a study circle was gradually formed under the guidance of a competent Pandit. He also encouraged the study of other subjects like

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Western philosophy. The dissemination of education among the illiterate masses also interested him greatly. He blessed and encouraged all who undertook such activities. He wrote to one:

"Be you the torch-bearers in the path of spreading knowledge. The cultivation of knowledge in the company of the Sadhus will impart a new appearance to the country, and the boys will have their life's aims correctly determined. It is only by so doing that the boys will become men—nay, they will become Rishis and gods.... What will one school or three or four Sevashramas avail? Have faith in God's grace, establish schools and Sevashramas in every town, village and hamlet."

To the saintly eye of the Swami women were the manifestations of the Divine Mother. His attitude to them was literally one of worship. He behaved himself like a child in their presence. Drawn by his guileless manners, spotless purity and charm, and a certain amount of feminine grace about him, women found themselves quite at ease in his company. Even the ladies of certain aristocratic Mohammedan families, where the strict rules of the purdah were observed, would come to him at the Maths at Dacca or in Calcutta to listen to his words.

Imbued with the ideals preached by Swami Vivekananda, he realised that a nation could never be great unless its women were educated and honoured. He not only exhorted the mothers of the nation to follow in the steps of the ideal womanhood of the past, but took great pains to

SWAMI PREMANANDA

instil into their minds the necessity of a liberal education. "Let thousands of Niveditas come out of Bengal....," he wrote to a lady, "Let there arise anew in the land numbers of Gargis, Lilavatis, Sitas, and Savitris....What better thing is there in this world than learning? Give knowledge, and ignorance will vanish through its culture."

The tie that bound the children of Sri Ramakrishna was built up in equal measure of the strands of love and reverence. This reverential attitude among the brother-disciples was specially manifest in Swami Premananda. In the presence of Swami Brahmananda, the President of the Mission, he behaved himself like a humble servant. He would start his daily work only after saluting him profoundly in the morning, if the latter happened to be at the Math.

He had the typical disregard of a Sadhu for personal comfort. When he would sit down to eat, he would take the best things from his plate and distribute them among the junior members. His wardrobe never exceeded the demands of sheer necessity. During his illness at Deoghar a devotee gave to his attendant four shirts for the Swami's use. On coming to know of this, he severely scolded the attendant saying: "I have never been accustomed to keeping too many shirts. Besides, it does not become a monk to have so much clothing." When he passed away diligent search could discover only an empty canvas bag and a few books which could be preserved as souvenirs.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Thus the Swami lived his unostentatious life for years, away from the public gaze. Sometimes playing the part of a spiritual teacher, sometimes that of a loving mother and sometimes even that of a schoolmaster, he aimed at building up the real manhood of those who came under his influence.

After about six years of service in the Math he set out on a pilgrimage to Amarnath in 1910 in company with Swamis Shivananda and Turiyananda. On his return he went on a tour in different parts of Bengal preaching the universal message of the Master. The enthusiasm he evoked by this tour is still a living memory with many. East Bengal in particular was fortunate in sharing his holy company, love and blessing. Wherever he went his enchanting figure left an unforgettable impression upon all, young and old, high and low. His tour reminded one of the triumphal procession of a hero. Men in crowds followed his trail wherever he stopped. People would flow in from morning till late at night to listen to a few inspiring words from his lips.

Many touching and remarkable incidents occurred during this journey. One which we are tempted to insert reveals his vision and greatness. In the course of his travels he found a village in Dacca filled with that scourge common in villages, namely, water-hyacinth. He asked the young men who accompanied him to remove the pest and himself proceeded to clear the pond. Inspired by his example the young men at once cleared the whole pond. Nor did they stop there.

SWAMI PREMANANDA

They organised a party and in several villages of Vikrampur carried on this work of removing water-hyacinths, which had been a standing nuisance for several years.

The long trip told on his health, and he returned to the Math with fever. The doctors diagnosed it to be the deadly Kala-Azar. He was sent to Deoghar for a change. After suffering from the malady for about a year and a half, when he was on the road to recovery, he suddenly fell a victim to influenza. He was brought down to Calcutta to the house of Balaram Bose. All medical help and care proved to be of no avail, and in the afternoon of Tuesday, July 30, 1918, he left the mortal coil and entered Mahasamadhi in the presence of his brother-disciples and monks of the Order.

The fell disease which held him in its deadly grip could not for a moment becloud the serenity of his faith. As in health, so also in illness, he would ever repeat, "The grace of the Master is the only support"; and the name of Sri Ramakrishna was ever on his lips. It is not for ordinary mortals whose gaze is chained to the procession of phenomena to measure the heights of spirituality to which he attained. Only a jeweller can appraise a diamond. Sri Ramakrishna used to refer to him as a jewel-casket. But does that lift the veil of ignorance which obstructs our vision?

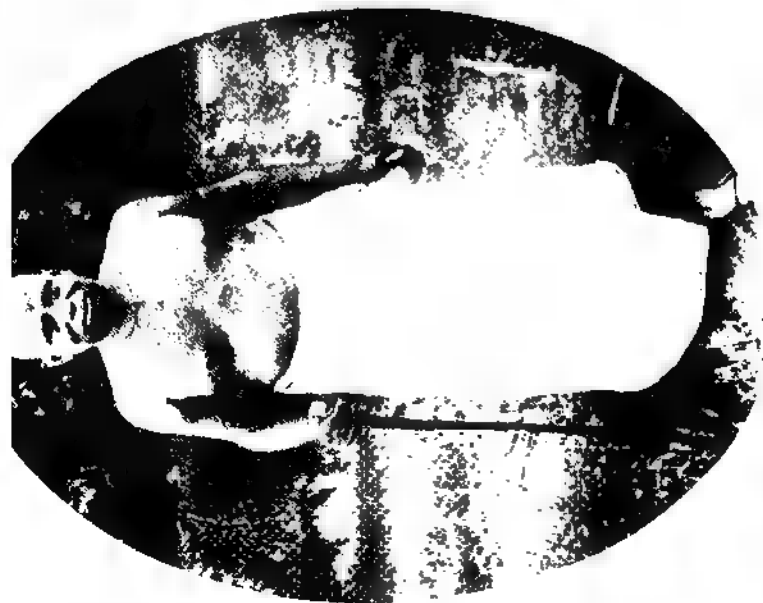
Like all men who have soared to the empyrean heights of spiritual realisations, he was reticent about his own experiences. One significant

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

incident which we reproduce below may give a momentary glimpse into the light that burnt within.

One day after evening service Swami Premananda sat down for meditation in a corner of the southern verandah of the shrine at Belur Math. The usual period of time flew by, but the Swami did not get up. The attendant of the shrine, when he came to offer Bhoga (offering to the deity), found him sitting stock-still with his body tilted a little backward. He surmised that sleep had overtaken his exhausted flesh. He called him repeatedly, but in vain. He returned after the service, called him again—still there was no response. He then held a light before him. The Swami opened his eyes by and by. On being asked if he had fallen asleep, the Swami broke into a sweet song: "I am awakened and will sleep no more. I am awake in the state of Yoga. O Mother, I have given back Thy mystic sleep to Thee and have put sleep to sleep."

Turning to the attendant he said: "When you find me in that state, don't call me or cry aloud, but repeat the Master's name in my ears. That will bring me back."



Swami Advaitananda (P. 134)



Swami Adbhutananda

IX

SWAMI ADBHUTANANDA

"Latu is the greatest miracle of Sri Ramakrishna," Swami Vivekananda once said with reference to Swami Adbhutananda, "having absolutely no education, he has attained to the highest wisdom simply at the touch of the Master." Yes, Latu Maharaj, by which name Swami Adbhutananda was popularly known, was the peer of the Master in this respect that he was entirely innocent of the knowledge of the three R's. Nay, he even surpassed Sri Ramakrishna in this ignorance; for whereas the Master could somehow manage to read and write, with Latu Maharaj any reading or writing was out of the question. It is said that once Sri Ramakrishna attempted to teach young Latu how to read and write. But in spite of repeated attempts Latu pronounced the Bengali alphabet in such a distorted way that the Master out of sheer despair gave up the attempt to educate Latu. But it does not matter that Latu had no book-learning. Books supply us knowledge by proxy, as it were. Latu had direct access to the Fountain-head of Knowledge. The result was that great scholars and philosophers would sit dumb at his feet to hear the words of wisdom that dropped from his lips. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that when a ray of light comes from the Great Source of all

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

light, all book-learning loses its value. Sri Ramakrishna's own life bore testimony to this fact. And to some extent this could be witnessed even in the life of Swami Adbhutananda, his disciple.

The early name of Swami Adbhutananda was Rakhturam. He was born of humble parents in a village in the district of Chapra in Bihar. His early life is shrouded in obscurity. It was very difficult to draw him out on that point. As a Sannyasin he was discreetly silent on matters relating to his home and relations. If anybody would ask him any question about his early days he would sharply answer, "Giving up all thought about God will you be busy about these trifles?" And then he would become so grave that the questioner would be awed into silence. Once a devotee expressed a desire to write a biography of Latu Maharaj. To this he raised objection saying: "What is the use of writing my life? If you want to write a biography, just write the biography of the Master and of Swami Vivekananda. That will be doing good to the world." Thus his humility did not allow anybody to have access to his inner greatness nor did it let people know many incidents of his life which would otherwise have been of great interest and profit to the public.

From the meagre details that fell from the lips of Latu Maharaj in his unguarded moments it was known that his parents were very poor—so much so that they could hardly make both ends meet in spite of their constant hard labour.

Scarcely was Rakhturam five years old, when he lost both his parents. His uncle then looked after him. As ill luck would have it, Rakhturam's uncle also had an unfortunate turn of circumstances and he had to leave his parental homestead and come to Calcutta for means of livelihood. The boy Rakhturam also accompanied him, and after a hard struggle for some days in Calcutta got employment as a house-boy in the house of Ramchandra Dutt, who was a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna.

Sometimes out of evil cometh good. Dire poverty drove Rakhturam to Calcutta, but there he got shelter in the house of one who was afterwards instrumental in opening out a new world for him.

As a servant Rakhturam was hard-working and faithful, but he had a keen sense of self-respect even at that early age. Once a friend of Ramchandra gave the indication of a suspicion that Rakhturam might pocket some money from the amount given him for marketing. Young Rakhtu at once flared up and said in half Bengali and half Hindusthani words, "Know for certain, sir, I am a servant but not a thief." With such firmness and dignity did he utter these words that the man was at once silenced. But he could not tolerate this affront from a boy servant. He reported the matter to Ramchandra, who, however, supported Rakhturam rather than his friend—the boy servant had already won the confidence of the master so much. Unsophisticated as he was, Rakhturam was very plain-spoken,

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

sometimes to the point of supposed rudeness. And he was no respecter of persons. As such *even the friends of Ramchandra* had sometimes to fear Rakhturam. This characteristic, good or bad, could be seen in Latu Maharaj throughout his whole life.

Ramchandra being a devotee, in his house there was a religious atmosphere and religious discussions could be heard. This had a great influence on the mind of Rakhturam, especially at his impressionable age. Once Rakhturam heard Ramchandra saying: "One who is sincere and earnest about God realises Him as sure as anything," "One should go into solitude and pray and weep for Him, then and then only will He reveal Himself," and such other things. These simple words impressed Rakhturam so much that throughout his whole life he remembered them, and often would he repeat them to others exactly as they were heard. From these words he found a clue as to how to build up his religious life, and they shaped his life. Sometimes Rakhturam could be seen lying down, covering himself with a blanket, his eyes moistened with tears which he was wiping with his left hand. The kind ladies of the house thought that the young boy was weeping for his uncle or village associations, and they would try to console him. Only the incidents of his after life indicated why Rakhturam was weeping at that time.

At Ramchandra's house Rakhturam heard of Sri Ramakrishna, and naturally he felt eager to see him. And soon Rakhturam found an

opportunity to go to Dakshineswar and meet the Master. At the very first meeting Sri Ramakrishna was greatly impressed with the spiritual potentiality of the boy, and Rakhturam felt immensely drawn to the Master even without knowing anything about his greatness. The pent-up feelings of love of this orphan boy found here an outlet for expression, and he felt so very attached to Sri Ramakrishna that henceforward it was impossible for Rakhturam to do his allotted duties with as much vigour and attention as he used formerly to do. All at Ramchandra's house noticed in Rakhturam a kind of indifference to everything, but they loved him so much that they did not like to disturb him.

Shortly after Rakhturam's meeting with Sri Ramakrishna, the latter went to Kamarpukur and remained there for about eight months. Rakhturam felt a great void in his heart at this absence of the one whom he loved so much. But he would still go to Dakshineswar now and then and passed some time there sad and morose. Those who knew him thought he had perhaps been reprimanded for some neglect of duty at the house of Ramchandra and had come to ease his mind. For how could they know the great anguish that made his heart heavy? Latu Maharaj afterwards said: "You cannot conceive of the sufferings I had at that time. I would go to Sri Ramakrishna's room, wander in the garden, stroll hither and thither. But everything would seem insipid. I would weep alone to unburden my heart. It was only Ram Babu who could to

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

some extent understand my feelings, and he gave me a photograph of the Master."

When Sri Ramakrishna returned from his native village, Rakhturam acquired a new life, as it were, and he would lose no opportunity to go to Dakshineswar to meet the Master. Ramchandra would now and then send fruits and sweets to the Master through this boy servant of his, and Rakhturam welcomed and greatly longed for such occasions.

Gradually it became impossible for Rakhturam to continue his service. He was athirst to be with the Master as much as possible, and the moment he came away from Dakshineswar he felt his life miserable. He openly expressed his desire to give up his job and remain at Dakshineswar. The members of Ramchandra's family would poke fun at him by saying, "Who will feed and clothe you at Dakshineswar?" But with this innocent boy that was not at all a serious problem. The only thing he wanted was to be with the Master at Dakshineswar.

At this time Sri Ramakrishna also felt the necessity of an attendant who could look after him. And when he proposed the name of Rakhturam to Ramchandra, the latter at once agreed to spare him. And thus Rakhturam got the long-wished-for opportunity of serving Sri Ramakrishna. As a mark of endearment Sri Ramakrishna would call Rakhturam "Leto," "Neto," or "Latu." Afterwards "Latu" was the name which became current. Of all the monastic disciples Latu was the first to come to the Master.

- Latu deemed it a rare privilege to be an attendant of one whom he loved so much, and he threw himself heart and soul into his new duties. How service to the Guru leads to God-realisation is exemplified in the life of Latu Maharaj. He was to Sri Ramakrishna what Hanuman was to Sri Ramchandra. He did not care for anything in the world, his only concern in life was how to serve the Master faithfully. A mere wish of Sri Ramakrishna was more than a law—a sacred injunction with Latu. Latu was once found sleeping in the evening. Perhaps he was overtired by the day's work. Sri Ramakrishna mildly reproved Latu for sleeping at such an odd time, saying, "If you sleep at such a time, when will you meditate?" That was all, and Latu gave up sleeping at night. For the rest of his life Latu would have a short nap in the day-time, and the whole night he would pass awake. He became the living illustration of the verse in the Gita—"What is night to the ordinary people is day to the Yogi."

Unsophisticated as Latu was, he had this great advantage: he would spend all his energy in action and waste no time in vain discussions. Modern minds, the sad outcome of the education they receive, will doubt everything they hear, and therefore discuss, reason, examine to see if that be true or right. Thus so much energy is lost in arriving at the truth that nothing is left for action. It was just the opposite with Latu. As soon as he heard a word from the Master he rushed headlong to put it into action. Afterwards

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

he would rebuke devotees who would come to him for instruction by saying: "You will simply talk and talk and do no work. What's the use of mere discussions?" Of course Latu was fortunate in having a Guru in whose words there was no room for any doubt or discussion and whom it was blessedness to obey and the more implicit that obedience the greater the benefit that could be reaped. And Latu was a fit disciple to take the fullest advantage of this rare privilege.

When Latu came to Sri Ramakrishna he did not bother much about the spiritual greatness of the Master. He loved the Master and so he longed to be with him. But the influence of such holy association was sure to have its effect. So there began to come a gradual transformation in the life of Latu. With reference to this the Master one day said to Latu that God was passing a camel through the eye of a needle. Thereby Latu understood, humility personified as he was, that unfit though he was God was moulding his life to make him a proper recipient of His grace.

Sri Ramakrishna gave him instructions in spiritual practices; and Latu with his tremendous faith in the words of the Master lost no time in putting them into practice. Many incidents are told of his power of deep meditation. One day Latu was meditating sitting on the bank of the Ganges. Then there came the flood-tide, and waters surrounded Latu. But he was unconscious of the external world. The news

reached the Master, who at once came and brought back his consciousness by loudly calling him. Another day Latu went to meditate in one of the Shiva temples just after noon. But it was almost evening, and still there was no news of Latu. The Master was anxious about him and sent some one to search for him. It was found that Latu was deeply absorbed in meditation and his whole body was wet with perspiration. On hearing this Sri Ramakrishna came to the temple and began to fan him. After some time Latu returned to the plane of consciousness and felt greatly embarrassed at seeing the Master fanning him. Sri Ramakrishna, however, removed his embarrassment by his sweet and affectionate words.

At this time Latu was day and night in high spiritual moods. With reference to this, the Master himself once remarked, "Latu will not come down, as it were, from his ecstatic condition."

Latu loved Kirtan—congregational songs to the accompaniment of devotional dance. Even while at the house of Ramchandra, if he would see a Kirtan party, he would run to join it, sometimes forgetful of his daily work. When Latu came to Dakshineswar he got greater opportunities to attend the Kirtan parties. On many occasions he would go into ecstasy while singing with them.

A straw best shows which way the wind blows. Sometimes insignificant incidents indicate the direction of the mind of a man. One day Latu,

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

along with others, was playing at an indoor game called "Golakdham." "Golak" means heaven. The point aimed at by each player was that his "piece" should reach "Golak." In the course of the play, when the "piece" of Latu reached the destination he was so beside himself with joy that one could see that he felt as if he had actually reached the salvation of life. Sri Ramakrishna was witnessing the game. When he saw the great ecstasy of Latu he is said to have remarked that Latu was so happy because in personal life he was greatly eager to attain liberation.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say that frankness is a virtue which one gets as a result of hard Tapasya in many previous births; and having frankness one can expect to realise God very easily. Latu was so very frank that one would wonder at seeing such a childlike trait in him. He would unreservedly speak of his struggle with the flesh to the Master and receive instructions from him.

Once Sri Ramakrishna told Latu, "Don't forget Him throughout the day or night." And of all forms of spiritual practices it seems Latu laid the greatest stress on repeating the sacred Name. This was also his instruction to others who would come to him for guidance in later days. To a devotee who pathetically asked him, "How can we have self-surrender to God whom we have never seen," Latu Maharaj said in his inimitable simple way: "It does not matter if you do not know Him. You know His name. Just take His name, and you will progress

spiritually. What do they do in an office? Without having seen or known the officer, one sends an application addressed to his name. Similarly send your application to God, and you will receive His grace."

With all his spiritual longing, Latu's chief endeavour in life was to serve the Master. Once he said in reply to one who questioned him as to how the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna got time for worship when they were so much devoted to his service, "Well, service to him was our greatest worship and meditation."

Latu accompanied Sri Ramakrishna as a devoted attendant when he was removed to Shyampukur and thence to Cossipore and served him till the last moment. Latu was one of the chosen few to whom the Master gave the Gerua cloth as a symbol of Sannyasa. Afterwards when the actual rite was performed and the family name had to be changed, Latu was named Swami Adbhutananda by the chief disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, perhaps because the life of Latu Maharaj was so wonderful—Adbhut—in every respect. Latu Maharaj was one of the first three members of the Ramakrishna Math at Baranagore. It was they who first gave the start and others joined them to make the Brotherhood complete.

After the passing away of the Master Latu Maharaj accompanied the Holy Mother to Vrindavan and stayed there for a short period. His love and reverence for the Holy Mother was next to that for the Master, if not equal. The Holy Mother also looked upon him exactly as her own

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

child. At Dakshineswar when she had had to pass through hard days of work, Latu had been her devoted assistant. Brought up in a village atmosphere she was very shy and would not talk with anyone outside a limited group. But as Latu was very young and had a childlike attitude towards her, she was free with Latu. The depth of love and devotion of Latu Maharaj to the Holy Mother throughout his whole life was amazing and beggars description.

At Baranagore, Latu Maharaj along with other brother-disciples passed continuously one year and a half in hard spiritual practices. He would spend the whole night in one or other form of Sadhana and in the day-time he would have a short sleep. That became his habit for his whole life. Even if ill, he would sit for meditation in the evening. At Baranagore he was at one time very ill with pneumonia. He was too weak to rise. But he would insist that he should be helped to sit in the evening. When reminded that the doctor had forbidden him to do that, he would show great resentment and say: "What does the doctor know? It is his (the Master's) direction, and it must be done." He would be so engrossed in spiritual practices and always so much in spiritual mood that he could not stick to any regular time for food and drink. It is said that at Baranagore because of this characteristic sometimes food would be sent to his room. But on many days the food that was sent in the morning remained untouched till at night. Latu Maharaj had no idea that he had not taken any meal. At

night when others retired Latu Maharaj would lie in his bed feigning sleep. When others were fast asleep, he would quietly rise and tell his beads. Once a funny incident happened on one of such occasions. While Latu Maharaj was telling his beads, ■ little sound was made. One of his brother-monks thought that a rat had come into the room and he kindled a light to drive it away. At this all found out the trick that Latu Maharaj was playing on them, and they began to poke fun at him.

Latu Maharaj had his own way of living and he could not conform to the routine life of an institution. Because of this he would afterwards live mostly outside the monastery with occasional short stays at the Alambazar or Belur Math. It is said that Swami Vivekananda once made it a rule that every one should get up in the early hours of the morning, with the ringing of a bell, and meditate. The next day Latu Maharaj was on his way to leave the Math. Swami Vivekananda heard the news and asked Latu Maharaj what the matter was with him. Latu Maharaj said: "My mind has not reached such a stage that it can with the ringing of your bell be ready for meditation. I shall not be able to sit for meditation at your appointed hours." The Swami understood the whole situation and waived the rule in favour of Latu Maharaj.

Sometimes Latu Maharaj stayed at the house of devotees, sometimes in a room at the Vasumati Press belonging to a lay disciple of the Master, and very often he lived on the bank of the Ganges

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

without any fixed shelter. The day-time he would pass at one bathing ghat, the night time he would spend at some other ghat with or without any roof. The policeman who kept watch came to know him and so would not object to his remaining there at night.

One night while it was raining Latu Maharaj took shelter in an empty compartment of a railway carriage that stood near by for taking goods. Soon the engine came and dragged the carriage to a great distance before Latu Maharaj was conscious of what had happened. He then got down and walked back to his accustomed spot. About his food Latu Maharaj was not at all particular. Sometimes a little quantity of gram soaked in water would serve for him the purpose of a meal. He lived on a plane where physical needs do not very much trouble a man, nor can the outside world disturb the internal peace. When asked how he could stay in a room in a printing press where there was so much noise, Latu Maharaj replied that he did not feel much difficulty.

But the main source of strength of Latu Maharaj was his dependence on the Master. He would always think that the Master would supply him with everything that he needed or was good for him. Latterly he would say to those who sought guidance from him: "Your dependence on God is so very feeble. If you do not get a result according to your own liking, in two days you give up God and follow your own plan as if you are wiser than He. Real self-surrender means that you will not waver in your faith even in the

face of great losses." There was nothing in the world which could tempt Latu Maharaj away from his faith in God and the Guru.

It is very difficult to trace the chronological events of Latu Maharaj's life: firstly because there were no events in his life excepting the fact that it was one long stillness of prayer and secondly because now and then he was out of touch with all. But Latu Maharaj wanted to live within a few miles of Dakshineswar, the great seat of Sadhana of the Master. In 1895 or 1896 he once went to Puri, in 1903 he was again at that holy city for about a month; and in the same year he visited some places of Northern India like Benares, Allahabad and Vrindavan. Swami Vivekananda took him in the party on his tour in Kashmir and Rajputana. Excepting these occasions Latu Maharaj lived mostly in Calcutta or near about. It is said that Latu Maharaj prayed to Jagannath at Puri that he might be vouchsafed two boons—first that he could engage himself in spiritual practices without having a wandering habit and second that he might have a good digestion. When asked why he asked for the second boon which seemed so strange, Latu Maharaj is said to have remarked: "Well, it is very important in a Sadhu life. There is no knowing what kind of food a Sadhu will get. If he has got a good stomach he can take any food that chance may bring, and thus preserving his health can devote his energy to spiritual practices."

Towards the end of 1898 when Ramchandra

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Dutt was on his death-bed, Latu Maharaj was by his side. For more than three weeks he incessantly nursed his old master who had been instrumental in bringing him in contact with one who had kindled the spiritual flame of his life. It is said that Latu Maharaj went on attending to the needs of the patient almost throughout twenty-four hours of the day. He took upon himself the main brunt of looking after the patient. With the same earnestness did he nurse the wife of Ramchandra Dutt, whom he regarded as his mother, in her dying moments. For about a month or so with anxious care and unsparingly Latu Maharaj attended her. It was only when she passed away that he left the house.

Though Latu Maharaj was never closely connected with the works of the Ramakrishna Mission, his love for his brother-disciples especially for the leader, whom he would call "Loren" in his distorted Bengali pronunciation, was very great. Latu Maharaj could not identify himself with the works started by Swami Vivekananda as they caused distraction to the inner flow of his spiritual life. But he had great faith in the mission of one whom the Master praised so much. He used to say, "I am ready to take hundreds of births if I can have the companionship of 'Loren-bhai.'" Swami Vivekananda infinitely reciprocated the love of Latu Maharaj. When on his return to Calcutta from the West, he was given a splendid reception and everybody was eager to see and talk with him, Swami Vivekananda made anxious inquiry about Latu Maharaj

SWAMI ADBHUTANANDA

and when the latter came he took him by his hand and asked why he had not come for so long. Latu Maharaj with his characteristic frankness said that he was afraid he would be a misfit in the aristocratic company where the Swami was. At this the Swami very affectionately said, "You are ever my Latu-bhai (Brother Latu) and I am your Loren-bhai," and dragged Latu Maharaj with him to take their meals together. The child-like simplicity and open-mindedness of Latu Maharaj made a special appeal to his brother-disciples, but they also had deep regard for his great spirituality. Sometimes they would poke fun at him taking advantage of his simplicity, though they always had high appreciation of his wonderful life. Swami Vivekananda used to say: "Our Master was original, and every one of his disciples also is original. Look at Latu. Born and brought up in a poor family, he has attained to a level of spirituality which is the despair of many. We came with education. This was a great advantage. When we felt depressed or life became monotonous, we could try to get inspiration from books. But Latu had no such opportunity for diversion. Yet simply through one-pointed devotion he has made his life exalted. This speaks of his great latent spirituality." Now and then the Swami would lovingly address Latu Maharaj as "Plato" distorting the word "Latu" into that famous Greek name—an indirect testimony to the wisdom the latter had attained. Sometimes the happy relationship between Latu Maharaj and his brother-disciples would give rise to very enjoyable

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

situations. Once in Kashmir, Swami Vivekananda, after visiting a temple, remarked that it was two or three thousand years old. At this Latu Maharaj questioned how he could come to such a strange conclusion. The great Swami was in a fix and replied: "It is very difficult to explain the reasons for my conclusion to you. It would be possible if you had got modern education." Latu Maharaj, instead of being embarrassed at this, said, "Well, such is your education that you cannot teach an illiterate person like myself." The reply threw all into roaring laughter.

In 1903 Latu Maharaj was persuaded to take up his residence at the house of the great devotee Balaram Bose. There he stayed for about nine years till 1912. A very unusual thing for Latu Maharaj! When the request for staying there came to Latu Maharaj, he at first refused it on the ground that there was no regularity about his time of taking food and drink and therefore he did not like to inconvenience anyone. But the members of the family earnestly reiterated their request saying that it would be rather a blessing than any inconvenience if he put up at their house and that arrangements would be made so that he might live in any way he liked.

Even at this place where everyone was eager to give him all comforts, Latu Maharaj lived a very stern ascetic life. An eye-witness describes Latu Maharaj as he was seen at Balaram Babu's place: "...Latu Maharaj was a person of few words. He was also a person of few needs. His

room bore witness to it. It lay immediately to the right of the house-entrance. The door was nearly always open, and as one passed, one could see the large empty space with a small thin mat on the floor, at the far end a low table for a bed, on one side a few half-dead embers in an open hearth and on them a pot of tea. I suspect that that pot of tea represented the whole of Latu Maharaj's concession to the body."

In this room Latu Maharaj passed the whole day almost alone, absorbed in his own thought. Only in the mornings and the evenings he would be found talking with persons who would approach him for the solution of their spiritual problems. Outwardly Latu Maharaj was stern and at times he would not reply though asked questions repeatedly. But when in a mood to talk and mix with people he was amazingly free and sociable. He had not the least trace of egotism in him. Beneath the rough exterior he hid a very soft heart. Those who were fortunate in having access to that found in him a friend, philosopher and guide. Even little boys were very free with him. They played with him, scrambled over his shoulders and found in him a delightful companion. Persons who were lowly and despised found a sympathetic response from his kindly heart. Once asked how he could associate himself with them, he replied, "They are at least more sincere."

Once a man tipsy with drink came to him at midnight with some articles of food and requested that Latu Maharaj must accept them, for after

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

that he himself could partake of them as sacramental food. A stern ascetic like Latu Maharaj quietly submitted to the importunities of this vicious character, and the man went away satisfied, all the way singing merry songs. When asked how he could stand that situation, Latu Maharaj said: "They want a little sympathy. Why should one grudge that?"

Another day a devotee came to him drenched with rain. Latu Maharaj at once gave him his own clothes to put on. The devotee got alarmed at the very suggestion of wearing the personal clothes of the much revered Latu Maharaj and also because they were ochre clothes, which it was sacrilegious for a lay man to put on. But Latu Maharaj persuaded him to wear them as otherwise he might fall ill and fail to attend the office—a very gloomy prospect for a poor man like him.

An outward sternness Latu Maharaj maintained perhaps to protect himself against the intrusion of people. But however stern he might be externally in order to keep off people or however much he might be trying to hide his spiritual fire, people began to be attracted by his wonderful personality. Though he had no academic education whatsoever, he could solve the intricate points of philosophy or the complex problems of spiritual life in such an easy way that one felt he saw the solutions as tangibly as one sees material objects. Once there came two Western ladies to Latu Maharaj. They belonged to an atheist society. As such they believed in humanitarian

works but not in God. "Why should you do good to others?" asked Latu Maharaj in the course of the conversation with them, "Where lies your interest in that? If you don't believe in the existence of God, there will always remain a flaw in your argument. Humanitarian work is a matter that concerns the good of society. You cannot prove that it will do good to yourself. So after some time you will get tired of doing the work that does not serve your self-interest. On the contrary if you believe in God there will be a perennial source of interest, for the same God resides in others as in you."

"But can you prove that the one God resides in many?" asked one of the ladies.

"Why not?" came the prompt reply, "but it is a subjective experience. Love cannot be explained to another. Only one who loves understands it and also the one who is loved. The same is the case with God. He knows and the one whom He blesses knows. For others He will ever remain an enigma."

"How can it be possible that I am the Soul, I being finite and the Soul being infinite?" asked a devotee.

"Where is the difficulty?" replied one who had the perception of the truth as clear as daylight, "Have you not seen jasmine flowers? The petals of those flowers are very small. But even those petals, dew-drops falling on them, reflect the infinite sky. Do they not? In the same way through the grace of God this limited self can reflect the Infinite."

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

"How can an aspirant grasp Brahman which is infinite?" asked a devotee with a philosophical bent of mind.

"You have heard music," said the monk who was quite innocent of any knowledge of academic philosophy, "you have seen how the strings of a Sitar bring out songs. In the same way the life of a devotee expresses Divinity."

Once at Baranagore Math Swami Turiyananda, who had very deep knowledge of scriptures, was saying that God was all kind and was above any sense of hatred or partiality. At this Latu Maharaj replied, "Nice indeed! You are defending God as if He is a child."

"If God is not impartial," said Swami Turiyananda, "is He then a despot like the Czar of Russia, doing whatever He likes according to His caprice?"

"All right, you may defend your God if you please," said Latu Maharaj, "but this you should not forget that He is also the power behind the despotism of a Czar."

Though he had no book-learning Latu Maharaj could instinctively see the inner significance of scriptures because of his spiritual realisations. Once a monk was reading out the *Kathopanishad* to him when he read the following Shloka:

"The Purusha of the size of a thumb, the inner soul, dwells always in the heart of beings. One should separate Him from the body with patience as the stalk from a grass."

When the last line was uttered Latu Maharaj was overjoyed and exclaimed, "Just the thing,"

as if he was giving out his own inner experience of life.

Though he himself could not read, he liked to hear scriptures read out to him. Once at dead of night—to him day and night had no difference—he awakened a young monk who slept in his room and asked him to read out the Gita to him. The young monk did that in compliance with his wish.

Latu Maharaj talked of high spiritual things when the mood for that came, but he was too humble to think that he was doing any spiritual good to anybody. Though by coming into contact with him many lives were changed, he did not consciously make any disciple. He used to say that only those persons who were born with a mission like Swami Vivekananda were entitled to make disciples or preach religion. He had a contempt for those who talked or lectured on religion without directing their energies to build up their own character. He used to say that the so-called preachers go out to seek people to listen to them, but if they realise the Truth people of their own accord would flock round them for spiritual help. Whenever he felt that his words might be interpreted as if he had taken the rôle of a teacher, he would rebuke himself muttering half-audible words. Thus Latu Maharaj was an unconscious teacher, but the effect of his unintentional teaching was tremendous on the people who came to him.

In 1912 Latu Maharaj went to Benares to pass his last days in that holy city. He stayed at various places in Benares. But wherever he

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

lived he radiated the highest spirituality and people circled round him. Even in advanced age he passed the whole night in spiritual practices. Sometimes in the day-time also, when he lay on his bed covered with a sheet and people took him to be sleeping, on careful observation he would be found to be absorbed in his own thoughts. During the last period of his life, he would not like very much to mix with people. But if he would talk, he would talk only of spiritual things. He would grow warm with enthusiasm while talking about the Master and Swami Vivekananda.

Hard spiritual practices and total indifference to bodily needs told upon his once strong health. The last two or three years of his life he was suffering from dyspepsia and various other accompanying ailments. But he was as negligent about his health as ever and one would very often hear him say, "It is a great botheration to have a body."

In the last year of his life he had a blister on his leg which developed gangrene. In the course of the last four days before his passing away, he was daily operated upon twice or thrice. But the wonder of wonders was, he did not show the least indication of any feeling of pain. It was as if the operation was done on some external thing. His mind soared high up and even the body-idea was forgotten. Latterly he would always remain indrawn. At the time of illness he was completely self-absorbed. His gaze was fixed on the middle of his brow, and his thoughts were withdrawn from the external world. Wide awake, but

SWAMI ADBHUTANANDA

oblivious of his surroundings, he stood midway between the conscious and the superconscious planes.

Then the moment came when the great soul was completely freed from the encagement of the body. Latu Maharaj entered into Mahasamadhi on April 24, 1920.

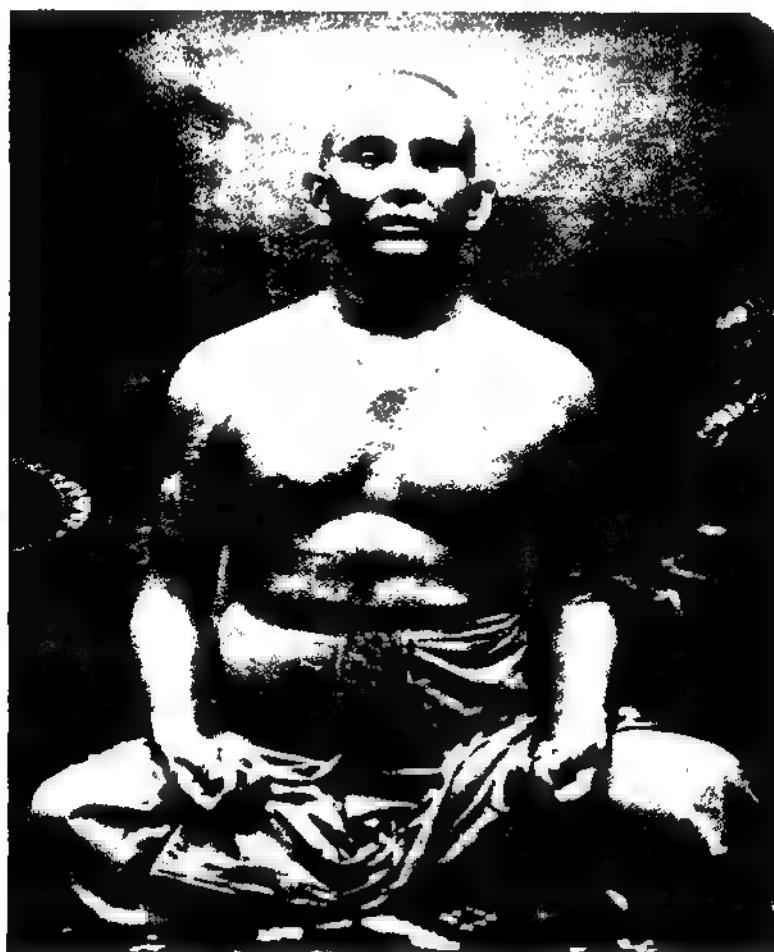
Those who witnessed the scene say that even after the passing, in his face there was such an expression of calm, joy and compassion that they could not distinguish the dead from the living state. Everyone was struck by that unique sight. A wonderful life culminated in a wonderful death. Indeed Sri Ramakrishna was a unique alchemist. Out of dust he could create gold. He transformed an orphan boy of lowly birth, wandering in the streets of Calcutta for a means of livelihood, into a saint who commanded the spontaneous veneration of one and all. It is said that when Latu Maharaj passed away Hindus, Mohammedans, people irrespective of caste or creed rushed to pay homage to that great soul. Such was his influence.

X

SWAMI TURIYANANDA

Each disciple of Sri Ramakrishna was great in his own way. Each had superb qualities which dazzled those who witnessed them. Swami Turiyananda was a blazing fire of renunciation. To be near him was to feel the warmth of his highly developed spiritual personality. From his very boyhood till the end, his life was a great fight: in the beginning it was a fight for his own spiritual evolution; during the later days to make those who came within the orbit of his influence better. He was as if ceaselessly alert and vigilant so that everything in and around him might be the expression of the highest spirituality. Yet it meant no struggle to him; it became so very natural with him. His early life was modelled on the teachings of Shankaracharya, and those who witnessed him in later days could witness in him a living example of a Jivanmukta. Swami Vivekananda once said to his American disciples, "In me you have seen the expression of Kshatriya power, I am going to send to you one who is the embodiment of Brahminical qualities, who represents what a Brahmin or the highest spiritual evolution of man is." And he sent Swami Turiyananda.

Swami Turiyananda was born in a Brahmin family in North Calcutta on January 3, 1863—



Swami Turiyananda

i.e., the same year as Swami Vivekananda was born in central Calcutta. His family name was Harinath Chattopadhyaya. He lost his parents while very young, and was brought up by his elder brother. He could not prosecute his studies beyond the Entrance class as his interest lay in another direction. He was born with good Sam-skaras and he made full use of them. From a very young age he would live like an orthodox Brahmacharin—bathing three times a day, cooking his own meal, and reciting the whole of the Gita before day-break. He was a deep student of the Gita, the Upanishads and the works of Shankaracharya. His mind was bent towards the Advaita Vedanta, and he strove sincerely to live up to that ideal. The story goes that once he was bathing in the Ganges when he saw a crocodile. His first reaction was to leave the water and come to the land for the safety of his life. At once the thought occurred to him; "If I am one with Brahman, why should I fear? I am not a body. And if I am Spirit, what fear have I from anything in the whole world, much less from a crocodile?" This idea so much stirred his mind that he did not leave the spot. Bystanders thought he was foolishly courting death. But they did not know that he was testing his faith in Advaita philosophy. The purpose of his life was to be a Jivanmukta. He himself once said that the first time he read the verse in which it is said that life is meant for the realisation of Jivan-mukti, he leaped in joy. For that was the ideal he was aiming at.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

The scriptures say that if a man is sincere he meets with his spiritual guide unsought for. Harinath also met with his Master unexpectedly and without knowing it. He was then a boy of thirteen or fourteen. He heard that a Paramahamsa would come to a neighbouring house. Out of curiosity he went to see the Paramahamsa. This Paramahamsa was no other than Sri Ramakrishna, who afterwards played a great part in moulding his life. To give the version of Swami Turiyananda himself: "A hackney carriage with two passengers in it stopped in front of the house. A thin emaciated man got down from the carriage supported by another man. He appeared to be totally unconscious of the world. When I got a better view of him, I saw that his face was surrounded with a halo. The thought immediately flashed in my mind, 'I have read about Shukadeva in scriptures. Is this then a man like him?' Supported by his attendant, he walked to the room with tottering gait. Regaining a little consciousness of the world he saw a large portrait of Kali on the wall and bowed his head before it. Then he sang a song depicting the oneness of Krishna and Kali which thrilled the audience."

He met Sri Ramakrishna again at Dakshineswar two or three years afterwards. Soon he became passionately devoted to Sri Ramakrishna, and began to see him as often as he could. Sri Ramakrishna asked Harinath to come to him avoiding holidays, when there was a large assemblage of visitors. Thus Harinath found an opportunity to talk very freely and intimately with the

Master. Sri Ramakrishna was startled to know from young Hari that his favourite book was the Rama-Gita, an Advaita treatise. In course of conversation one day Harinath told Sri Ramakrishna that he found great inspiration while he visited Dakshineswar, whereas in Calcutta he felt miserable. To this appealing statement of the young disciple, Sri Ramakrishna said, "Why, you are a servant of the Lord Hari, and His servant can never be unhappy anywhere." "But I don't know that I am His servant," said the boy. The Master reiterated: "Truth does not depend upon anybody's knowledge of it. Whether you know it or not, you are a servant of the Lord." This reassured Harinath.

From an early age Harinath had an abhorrence of women. He did not allow even little girls to come near him. One day in answer to an inquiry from the Master on this subject he said, "Oh, I cannot bear them." "You talk like a fool!" said the Master reprovingly, "Look down upon women! What for? They are the manifestation of the Divine Mother. Bow down to them as to your mother and hold them in respect. That is the only way to escape their influence. The more you hate them, the more you will fall into the snare." These fiery words penetrated into the heart of Harinath and changed his entire outlook on women.

One day Harinath asked the Master how one could completely get rid of the sex-idea. Sri Ramakrishna replied that one needed not think in that line. One should try to think of positive

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

ideas, of God, then only one would be free from any sex-idea. This was a new revelation to the young boy.

We have said that Harinath was a deep student of Vedanta and tried to mould his life according to its teachings. One day the Master told Harinath: "They say you are studying and meditating on Vedanta nowadays. It is good. But what does the Vedanta philosophy teach? Brahman alone is real and everything else is unreal—isn't that its substance, or is there anything more? Then why don't you give up the unreal and cling to the Real?" These words threw a new light on Vedanta and turned the thoughts of Harinath in a new direction.

A few days later Sri Ramakrishna went to Calcutta and sent for Harinath; when he came he found the Master in a state of semi-consciousness. "It is not easy to see the world of phenomena as unreal," the Master began addressing the assembled devotees. "This knowledge is impossible without the special grace of God. Mere personal effort is powerless to confer this realisation. A man is after all a tiny creature, with very limited powers. What an infinitesimal part of truth can he grasp by himself!" Harinath felt as if these words were directed to him, for he had been straining every nerve to attain illumination. The Master then sang a song eulogising the miraculous power of divine grace. Tears flowed down his cheeks, literally wetting the ground. Harinath was deeply moved. He too burst into tears. After that he learned to surrender

himself at the feet of the Lord. Harinath felt an intense longing for liberation. He wanted very much to realise God in this very life. In his agony of yearning for the realisation of God he would sometimes weep. One night he cried much on the bank of the Ganges at Dakshineswar. Just at that time Sri Ramakrishna was inquiring where he had gone. When Harinath returned, Sri Ramakrishna consoled him and said: "The Lord is greatly pleased if one cries to Him. The tears of love wash away all mental impurities accumulated through ages. It is very good to cry to God."

Another day he was meditating in the Panchavati grove at Dakshineswar. His concentration became very deep. Just then Sri Ramakrishna came towards him. As soon as Sri Ramakrishna looked at him, Harinath burst into tears. Sri Ramakrishna stood still. Harinath felt something creeping up inside his bosom and was overcome by an irrepressible fit of shaking. Sri Ramakrishna remarked that this crying was not for nothing, it was a sort of ecstasy. Referring to this incident Swami Turiyananda once said: "The awakening of the Kundalini was an easy matter for Sri Ramakrishna. He could do that even without touching, by merely standing near by."

Sri Ramakrishna used to speak highly of his great spiritual potentialities. Speaking one day of his disciple's core of personality, Sri Ramakrishna remarked, "He comes of that transcendent region whence name and form are

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

manufactured!" Sri Ramakrishna loved Harinath dearly. Once the young man did not come to Dakshineswar for a number of days. When at last he came the Master said to him in a voice choked with emotion: "Why don't you come here? I love to see you all because I know that you are God's special favourites. Otherwise what can I expect from you? You have not the means to offer me a pice worth of presents, nor have you a tattered mat to spread on the floor when I go to your house. And still I love you so much. Don't fail to come here (meaning himself), for this is where you will receive everything. If you are sure to find God elsewhere, go there by all means. What I want is that you realise God, transcend the misery of the world and enjoy divine beatitude. Anyhow try to attain it in this life. But the Mother tells me that you will realise God without any effort if you only come here. So I insist upon your coming." As he spoke thus he actually wept.

It is needless to say Harinath also had extraordinary veneration for the Master. In later days when he was severely suffering from various physical ailments, he once remarked that the bliss he had got in the company of the Master more than compensated for all the suffering he had had in his whole life.

After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna when the monastery at Baranagore had been established, Harinath joined it in 1887 when he was twenty-four years of age. Nothing need be told here about the days of austerity and Tapasya

SWAMI TURIYANANDA

of these young monks at this first monastery of the Ramakrishna Order. The great fire of spirituality that was kindled at Dakshineswar by the Master they kept alive at Baranagore to be handed down to the world at large for the benefit of humanity.

The Sannyasin-like love for freedom made some of these young monks feel that they must not confine themselves to one place. They must go out in the wide world depending solely on God and gather spiritual experiences from the hardships and difficulties of life. Some went out on pilgrimages, some went out for Tapasya in deeper solitude. Swami Turiyananda also left the shelter of the Baranagore Math and for years travelled on foot from one holy city to another, practising the most rigorous Sadhanas. He had often scarcely the barest necessities about him—at times not even a blanket. The severe winter of Northern India he passed with a cotton Chaddar, and for his food he had what chance might bring. He travelled through the Central Provinces and stayed for some time at Rajpur, near Dehra Dun, and it was here that an astrologer told him he would soon meet one whom he most liked. In a day or two he, to his great surprise, met Swami Vivekananda, who was accompanied by some other Gurubhais. Swami Turiyananda joined the party and practised Tapasya at Rishikesh, the famous retreat of Sadhus, a few miles above Hardwar. After Swami Vivekananda had recovered from the severe fever which he had here, he went to Meerut to recoup his health, and from

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

there to Delhi. Swami Turiyananda was also one of the party which accompanied him. Swami Turiyananda again met Swamiji at Bombay and at Mt. Abu, when the latter was about to depart for America in 1893. Swami Turiyananda used to say that from the radiant form of Swamiji he could at once judge that he had perfected himself in Sadhana and was ready to impart to mankind the results of his experience. At Bombay Swamiji told Swami Turiyananda, "Haribhai (Swamiji used to call him by this affectionate appellation), I don't know what I have gained by austerities and spiritual practices, but this I find, that from the experience of travel throughout India my heart has expanded. I feel intensely for the poor, the afflicted, the distressed people of India. Let me see if I can do anything for them."

Sometimes during this period he visited the celebrated Himalayan shrines of Kedarnath and Badrinarayan and had stayed for a period at Srinagar (Garhwal). Talking of the days in Garhwal the Swami once said: "I was continuously in an exalted mood. My only idea was to realise Him. I not only committed to memory eight Upa-nishads, but used to be absorbed in the meaning of each Mantra." He also prayed to the Divine Mother at this time with eyes soaked in tears that all book-learning might be wiped off from his mind. For the thing which he wanted was God-realisation and not dry intellectualism. He was a master of his senses and once he sat down to meditate, external troubles could not reach the inner sanctuary of his mind. He spoke of this

later on to a Swami of the Ramakrishna Order: "When I sit down for meditation I lock the entrances to my mind, and after that nothing external can reach there. When I unlock them, then only can the mind cognise things outside." On another occasion to a young Sannyasin he remarked: "Write in big characters on the doors of your mind 'No Admission'—and no outside disturbance will trouble you during meditation. It is because you allow outside things to disturb you that they have access to your mind." During this wandering life one day he had a very interesting experience. While he was travelling from place to place on foot, the thought began to torment him that whereas every one was doing something in this world, he was living only a useless, vagrant life. He could not shake off this thought however much he tried. At last it became so oppressive to him that he threw himself down under a tree. There he fell asleep and had a dream. He saw himself lying on the ground and then he saw that his body began to expand in all directions. It went on expanding and expanding till it seemed to cover the whole world. Then it occurred to him: "See how great you are, you are covering the whole world. Why do you think your life is useless? A grain of Truth will cover a whole world of delusion. Get up, be strong and realise the Truth. That is the greatest life." He awoke and jumped up and all his doubts vanished.

In some parts of his travels in the United Provinces and the Punjab he was accompanied by

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Swami Brahmananda. During this Parivrajaka life Swami Turiyananda heard of the phenomenal success of Swami Vivekananda in the Chicago Parliament of Religions, which news reached the shores of India and vibrated from one end of the country to the other. At this time Swami Vivekananda was writing from America to his brother-disciples to meet together and organise themselves into a band for the spread of the message of Sri Ramakrishna. At first Swami Turiyananda did not pay any heed to such an idea. His love for a life of Tapasya was too great for him to think of anything else. At last, a short while before the return of Swami Vivekananda to India, he came back to the Ramakrishna Math, which had by then been transferred to Alambazar.

Swami Vivekananda gradually persuaded Swami Turiyananda to work. Swami Vivekananda had a great admiration for this brother-disciple. In a letter from America Swami Vivekananda wrote in 1895, "Whenever I think of the wonderful renunciation of Hari, about his steadiness of intellect and forbearance, I get a new access of strength!" Swami Turiyananda's love for Swami Vivekananda also was unique. He would be ready to sacrifice anything for one whom Sri Ramakrishna dubbed as the leader of the party.

At the Alambazar Math Swami Turiyananda took upon himself the task of training the young recruits to the Order. He began to help them in meditation and teach them the scriptures like the Gita, the Upanishads, etc. He began to take

SWAMI TURIYANANDA

public classes in North Calcutta. In 1899, when Swami Vivekananda started for America for the second time, he persuaded Swami Turiyananda to accompany him for the American work. Swami Turiyananda being a man of meditation was averse to the life of public preaching. So Swami Vivekananda found it hard, in the beginning, to persuade him to go to America. When all arguments failed, Swami Vivekananda, it is said, put his arms round his Gurubhai's neck and actually wept like a child as he uttered these words: "Dear Haribhai, can't you see I have been laying down my life, inch by inch, in fulfilling this mission of the Master, till I am on the verge of death! Can you merely be looking on and not come to my help by relieving me of a part of my great burden?" Swami Turiyananda was overpowered and all his hesitation gave way to the love he bore for the leader. Swami Turiyananda then agreed to go to the West, however much he disliked it as being a land steeped in luxury and materialism.

Swami Turiyananda reached New York *via* England towards the end of August, 1899, along with Swami Vivekananda. Swami Turiyananda worked at first at the Vedanta Society of New York and then he took up additional work at Mont Clair—a country town, about an hour's journey from New York. Both at New York and Mont Clair the Swami made himself beloved of all. He carried the Indian atmosphere about him wherever he was. When he came to America, he said to Swami Vivekananda that platform work

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

was not in his temperament. At this Swami Vivekananda told him that if he lived the life that would be enough. Yes, Swami Turiyananda lived the life. Intensely meditative, gentle, quiet, unconcerned about the things of the world, Swami Turiyananda was a fire of spirituality. His very presence was a superb inspiration. He did not care much for public work and organisation. He was for the few, not for big crowds. His work was with the individual—character-building. And the greatest scope for work in this line he got when he lived with a group of students in the Shanti Ashrama, at California.

A Vedanta student of New York, feeling the great need of a Vedanta retreat in the West where the students could live like Indian Sannyasins, offered to Swami Vivekananda a homestead in California—160 acres of free Government land—situated in San Antonio Valley about fifty miles from the nearest railway station and market. The place was naturally very solitary and in addition it commanded very beautiful scenery. Far, far away from human habitation the place stretched out in a rolling, hilly country. Oak, pine, chaparral, chamisal and manzanita covered part of the land, the other part was flat and covered with grass. Swami Vivekananda accepted the gift and sent Swami Turiyananda to open an Ashrama there. Swami Turiyananda went and started what was to be known as the Shanti Ashrama.

From New York Swami Turiyananda went first to Los Angeles and stayed there for a short

SWAMI TURIYANANDA

while. Teaching and talking and holding classes, the Swami became an influence in Los Angeles. But he could not stay there in spite of the earnest entreaties of the students, for he had come for other work. From Los Angeles he went to San Francisco, and stayed there for some time before he actually started for the Shanti Ashrama. It was at San Francisco that Swami Vivekananda told the students, "I have only talked, but I shall send you one of my brethren who will show you how to live what I have taught." The students eagerly longed for the coming of the Swami about whom Swami Vivekananda spoke so highly, and naturally they expected much from him. Their expectation was more than fulfilled, for in Swami Turiyananda they found a living embodiment of Vedanta. During his short stay at San Francisco Swami Turiyananda gave a great impetus to the students who had formed themselves into the Vedanta Society of San Francisco.

With the first batch of a dozen students Swami Turiyananda one day left San Francisco for his future work in the San Antonio Valley. When the party arrived there, many initial difficulties presented themselves. Except for one old log cabin, there was no shelter. Water had to be brought from a long distance. But the enthusiasm of the students at the prospect of a future Ashrama was unbounded. Gradually things took shape. Tents were pitched, a well was dug and a meditation cabin was erected. Though the students were accustomed to the comforts of city life—some of them bred up in wealth and luxury—they all

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

braved any difficulty that came in the way. Soon they were in a position to devote their individual attention to spiritual practices.

At this place Swami Turiyananda lived in one of his most intense spiritual moods—day and night talking only of God and the Divine Mother and allowing no secular thought to disturb the atmosphere of the Ashrama. The minds of the students were constantly kept at a high pitch through classes in meditation, the study of scriptures, and so on. With the Swami there was no special time for instruction. He was always in such an exalted mood that to any topic he would spontaneously, and unconsciously as it were, give a spiritual turn. There was no set of definite rules for the Ashrama, but the very life of the Swami was so very inspiring that everything in the Ashrama went on in an orderly and systematic way. Once a student actually asked the Swami to formulate a set of rules and regulations. "Why do you want rules?" the Swami said, "Is not everything going on nicely and orderly without formal rules? Don't you see how punctual everyone is, how regular we all are? The Divine Mother has made Her own rules, let us be satisfied with that. We have no organisation but see how organised we are. This is the highest organisation: it is based on spiritual laws."

In later days it was found that his method of chastisement was unique. He had a very loving heart, but usually he would keep his emotions under control and not give free play to them. Therefore a little reserved or a slightly apathetic

attitude on his part helped to set the delinquent right.

Once, to a young monk who was laughing loudly to the disturbance of others in an Ashrama in India, the Swami said by way of reproof: "Well, have you realised God, have you attained life's goal, that you can give yourself up so wholeheartedly to laughter?" A man of God as he was, he could not but talk in that strain even while scolding. Once interrogated by a curious student as to how men and women of pronounced and different temperaments were living so peacefully together in the Shanti Ashrama, the Swami said: "As long as we remain true to the Mother there is no fear that anything will go wrong. But the moment we forget Her, there will be great danger. Therefore I always ask you to think of the Mother."

In those days the word "Mother" was constantly on his lips. "Mother tells me to do this," or "Mother wants me to tell you that," he would say. The Swami felt that the Divine Mother was guiding him in every way, that She was directing all his actions, even his speech. Referring to this period, he once remarked, "I could palpably see how Mother was directing even every single footfall of mine."

At times fiery exhortation came from the Swami to the students to make God-realisation the only aim of the life. "Clench your fists and say: I will conquer! Now or never—make that your motto, even in this life I must see God," the Swami would exhort, "That is the only way. Never

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

postpone. What you know to be right, do that and do that at once, do not let any chance go by. The way to failure is paved with good intentions. That will not do. Remember, this life is for the strong, the persevering: the weak go to the wall. And always be on your guard. Never give in." And as these words would come not from his lips but from the very depth of his heart, and as his own life was the visible example of these instructions, the effect was tremendous. The students forgot, as it were, the whole world, their past associations, and lived in intense longing for God; and new-comers would unconsciously fall into that atmosphere.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say: "If a cobra bites a man, its poison will have sure effect; in the same way, if a man comes in contact with a really spiritual person, his life is sure to be changed." Those who came in touch with Swami Turiyananda or received training under him, were transformed—metamorphosed. In America as well as in India many are the persons whose outlook on life entirely changed because of the influence of the Swami. Afterwards Swami Turiyananda used to say, "If I can put a single life on the path of God, I shall deem my work a great success." Certainly the number of persons whose thoughts turned Godwards because of the living example of the Swami is large. A student who was with Swami Turiyananda at the Shanti Ashrama writes: "To think of Swami Turiyananda is an act of purification of the mind; to remember his life, an impulse to new endeavour."

SWAMI TURIYANANDA

But to transform lives is not an easy task. Especially to change the outlook of those who are brought up in a different culture and tradition and are born with diverse tendencies of past lives is an arduous work. As such Swami Turiyananda had a very strenuous life at the Shanti Ashrama—so much so that his health broke down within the short period of two years.

Swami Turiyananda badly required a change for his health. It was therefore decided that he should come to India—at least for a visit, especially as he was very eager to see the leader—Swami Vivekananda. But before he reached Calcutta, the tragic news reached him that Swami Vivekananda had passed away. This news gave him such a great shock that a few days after he had arrived at Belur Math he again started for North India to pass his days in Tapasya. For about eight years he practised severe spiritual practices—staying at various places like Vrindavan, Garhmukteswar in Dt. Bulandshaher, Uttarkashi in Tehri State and Nagal, some sixty miles below Hardwar. Except at Vrindavan, he lived alone and begged his food though his health was indifferent and he needed help. A Brahmacharin went to serve him at Nagal, but the Swami would not allow him to do so, saying, “Ganges-water is my medicine and Narayana is my doctor.” He realised this idea so tangibly in his life that he felt absolutely no necessity for any other help and care. Afterwards he used to say that when he was unwell at Nagal, at first he made a deliberate effort to live to the above principle, but

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

soon it became quite natural with him. While at Vrindavan he was joined by Swami Brahmananda, the then President of the Ramakrishna Mission who had taken temporary leave from work for Tapasya, and they both lived together performing intense spiritual practices.

After coming from America he no longer engaged himself in any active work, excepting that with the co-operation of Swami Shivananda, one of his Gurubhais, he built an Ashrama at Almora. Even there the Ashrama grew as a by-product as they stayed there only to perform Tapasya. For a short period he stayed at the Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati. During his stay here he would hold scripture classes and render help in the matter of editing the writings and speeches of Swami Vivekananda.

As a result of severe austerities his health was being undermined. But still he would not desist. His motto was, "Let pain and body look to themselves, but you, my mind, rest in the contemplation of God." In 1910, when he was seriously ill, the authorities of the Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama at Kankhal somehow persuaded him to come to the Sevashrama, where he was treated and taken care of.

About the year 1911 he developed symptoms of diabetes, which began to increase gradually. As a result of this he got carbuncle on his back for which he had to undergo operations several times. Strange to say, in none of the operations did he allow himself to be put under chloroform; and the surgeons themselves wondered at such a

thing. He had the wonderful capacity to dissociate his mind from the body-idea, and so he did not feel the necessity for any chloroform. But he also had extraordinary fortitude as well as living faith in God; so it was easy for him to bear any amount of bodily suffering. Once, when he had an eye-complaint, nitric acid was applied to one of his eyes through mistake. When the mistake was found out and everybody got alarmed, he simply smiled and said, "It is the will of the Mother." Fortunately the eye was saved.

The last three and a half years of his life he stayed at the Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama at Benares, where he passed away on July 21, 1922.

The manner of one's death often indicates the life one has lived. Swami Turiyananda's death was as wonderful as his life was exemplary. The day before his passing, the Swami said all of a sudden, "To-morrow is the last day. To-morrow is the last day." But none could realise the meaning of these words just then. Next morning when Swami Akhandananda, one of his brother-disciples, came to see him, Swami Turiyananda said to him, "We belong to the Mother and the Mother is ours. Repeat, repeat." This he himself repeated a number of times. He then made obeisance to the Divine Mother reciting the well-known Mantra beginning with सर्व मंगल मंगल्ये (salutation to the Divine Mother—the source of all beneficence and bliss). This he repeated in the noon and also in the afternoon.

In the afternoon he insisted on being helped to

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

sit in ■ meditation posture. But as his strength gave way he could not remain sitting; and much against his wishes he was forced to lie down in bed. Then he said: "The body is falling off—the Pranas are departing. Make the legs straight and raise my hands." The hands being raised, he joined the palms and made repeated salutations uttering the name of the Master. And then he suddenly spoke out as if realising Brahman in everything; "This creation is Truth (सत्य). This world is Truth. All is Truth. Prana is established in Truth." Then he recited the Vedic Mantra, सत्यं ज्ञानमनन्तं ब्रह्म । प्रज्ञानमानन्दं ब्रह्म । He asked to have it repeated; and Swami Akhandananda recited it. Hearing this ultimate Truth of the Upanishads, the Swami said, "That is enough," and entered into Mahasamadhi. It seemed as though he quietly passed into sleep. Not a sign of pain or distortion was visible on his person. His face became aglow with a divine beauty and an unspeakable blessedness. Those who witnessed the incident could not but come to the conclusion that life and death for such a soul were like going from one apartment to another. While in the physical body Swami Turiyananda felt the living guidance of the Divine Mother so much that one would believe that Death simply intensified that feeling in the Swami. The Divine Mother simply called Her child to Herself away from the arena of the world's activities.

Swami Turiyananda began life with a firm belief in the utility of self-exertion, but ended in perfect resignation to the Divine will. His

self-surrender was, however, no less dynamic than his early impetuosity to storm the citadel of God. These two attitudes may seem contradictory. But the Swami himself explained how they are not. Birds fly about in the infinite sky on and on till they are tired and weary, then they sit on the mast of a ship for rest. The same is the case with a man who believes in self-exertion. He strives and strives, knocks and knocks, but with every striving his egotism receives a blow till at last it is completely smashed, and he realises that the Divine Mother is everything. But to reach that ultimate stage one must struggle sincerely and earnestly. There should be no self-deception in spiritual life. Because people forget that, surrender to the Divine will becomes identified with a drifting life of inertia in the cases of many.

Once he experienced that the Divine Mother actually wiped off any trace of egotism in him. And he used to say, pointing to his heart, "The Mother is wide awake here and not asleep." In the course of conversation he once gave out, "At one time I felt that every footstep of mine was through Her power and that I was nothing. I clearly felt this. This feeling lasted for some days."

There was another aspect of his self-surrender to the Divine Mother. It made him absolutely free from any fear. People who talk glibly of Divine will and all that are found, more often than not, to be timid and victims of false, if not hypocritical, humility. But the case was just the opposite with Swami Turiyananda. He did not

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

know what it was to fear. During the Terrorist Movement in Bengal the police were after many monks living in North India. Swami Turiyananda was then at Dehra Dun. A police officer of high rank was after him incognito. Once he asked the Swami whether he was afraid of the police people, as even some monks were. They were out for a walk. On hearing those words the Swami at once halted, looked to the man behind and with eyes emitting fire, as it were, said: "I do not fear even Death, why should I fear any human being? In the whole life I have done no crime, what reason have I to fear the police?" The words were uttered with so much strength and firmness that the man looked small. He felt so much awed by the greatness of the personality that stood before him, that he touched the feet of the Swami and apologised. Afterwards he became an admirer and devotee of the Swami. To come to the very presence of the Swami was to have a new infusion of strength. In all his conduct and behaviour—nay, in his very gait there was a dignity which indicated that here was a man who looked the whole world in the face. But in his heart of hearts he realised that he was nothing and the Mother was everything.

Even in the complete self-effacement of Swami Turiyananda before the Divine Mother, how active he was! Even in his severe illness he was intensely active. His Shanti Ashrama days were a period of very, very hard labour. When he passed his days in Tapasya, he would live an intense life. He was a man of uncompromising

attitude. Whatever he would do, he would apply the whole strength of his soul to it. One found him always sitting erect—even in his illness, even while on an easy chair, he would never bend his body. This simple physical characteristic represented, as it were, his mental attitude. He was unbending in not allowing Maya to catch him. In his self-exertion as well as in his self-surrender one would find a great spiritual force intensely active in him.

When he was in any of the Ashramas or Maths, he would hold classes or inspire people for a higher life through conversation. He was a great conversationalist. But his conversation was always full of great spiritual fervour. In it flowed quotations from the Gita, Upanishads, Tulsidas, Kabir or Nanak as also from the Bible. Once asked as to how his conversation was so spontaneous and at the same time of a high level of spiritual quality, the Swami said, "Well, from my childhood I have lived that life intensely."

Not a few received spiritual impetus in their lives through his letters. Not being able to be with him personally, these devotees had correspondence with him regarding their spiritual difficulties. And the letters the Swami wrote in reply would always wield a tremendous influence upon their lives. These letters indicate his clear thinking, vast scholarship and more than that, his spiritual vision. Once asked as to how his answers to the questions became so effective, the Swami said: "There are two ways of answering a question—one is to answer from the intellect, the other is to

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

answer from within. I always try to answer from within." While answering questions, the Swami would get, as it were, glimpses of the mental state of the questioner. Naturally his answers were like flashes of illumination.

Thus though not actively engaged in any philanthropic work, the life of the Swami was of tremendous influence to many. Swami Turiyananda had a remarkable breadth of vision. In him there was the synthesis of Jnana, Karma, Yoga and Bhakti and many things more. That was perhaps the main reason why all classes of people were attracted to him. He greatly eulogised the Seva work as inaugurated by Swami Vivekananda. Though Swami Turiyananda spent his whole life in intense spiritual practices in the form of meditation and contemplation, he used to say: "If one serves the sick and the distressed in the right spirit, in one single day one can get the highest spiritual realisation." Even while in his very death-bed he exhorted a fagging disciple with the words: "Don't doubt. Do the work started by Swamiji, meaning Swami Vivekananda, in the right spirit. From that itself will come Samadhi or any other supreme spiritual attainment. Have no doubt. Plunge headlong into work. Swami Vivekananda once told me, 'Haribhai, I have chalked out a new path to God-realisation. So long people thought that salvation could be had only through prayer, meditation and the like. But now my boys will attain the bliss of liberation-in-life by mere selfless works.' So have no doubt. It is his charge."

SWAMI TURIYANANDA

He had a feeling heart. He felt for the masses of India and encouraged all forms of philanthropic work. He was in close touch with all current events. He took great interest in the movements started by Mahatma Gandhi and was anxiously hoping that they might bring better days for the sunken millions of India.

His devotional side was very marked. He used to visit shrines as often as he could, and devotional songs always had a telling effect upon him. His chanting of sacred texts on special holy occasions was a thing to enjoy—such a devotional attitude and such perfect intonations one could seldom meet with.

Swami Turiyananda was one of those rare souls whose very birth is a blessing to humanity. But even in their death they leave behind an example whose burning light blazes far, far into the future. Swami Turiyananda lived a life which is sure to supply inspiration to many even in the time to come.

XI

SWAMI SUBODHANANDA

The early name of Swami Subodhananda was Subodh Chandra Ghosh. He was born in Calcutta in the year 1867 and belonged to the family of Shankar Ghosh, the founder of the famous Kali temple at Kali Tala (Thanthania), Calcutta. His father was a very pious man and fond of religious books; his mother also was of a very religious disposition. The influence of his parents contributed not a little to the growth of his religious life. His mother would tell him stories from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and other scriptures, and implanted in him, while still very young, love for truth and devotion to God. From his very boyhood he showed a remarkable spirit of renunciation and had a vague feeling that he was not meant for a householder's life. When pressed to marry, he emphatically said that he would take to the life of a wandering monk and so marriage would only be an obstacle in his path. As it was settled that on his passing the class examination he was to be married, Subodh fervently prayed to God that the result of his examination might be bad. God heard the prayer of the little boy, and Subodh, to his great relief, failed in the examination and did not get promotion. Subodh was at first a student of the Hare School and was then admitted into

the school founded by Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar.

At this time he got from his father a copy of the Bengali book, *The Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna*. He was so much impressed with its contents that he was very eager to see Sri Ramakrishna. His father told him to wait till some holiday when he could conveniently take him to Dakshineswar. But Subodh was impatient of any delay. So one day he stole away from the house and along with a friend started on foot for Dakshineswar. There he was received very affectionately by Sri Ramakrishna, who caught hold of his hand and made him sit on his bed. Subodh felt reluctant to sit on the bed of a holy person, but Sri Ramakrishna disarmed all his fears by treating him as if he were his close relation. In the course of conversation Sri Ramakrishna told Subodh that he knew his parents and had visited their house occasionally and that he had also known that Subodh would be coming to him. Sri Ramakrishna grasped the hand of Subodh and remaining in meditation for a few minutes said, "You will realise the goal, Mother says so." He also told Subodh that the Mother sent to him those who would receive Her grace, and he requested the boy to visit him on Tuesdays and Saturdays. The request was difficult of accomplishment for Subodh as great objection would come from his parents if they knew of his intention.

The next Saturday, however, Subodh fled away from the school with his friend and went to Dakshineswar. During this visit Sri Ramakrishna

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

in an ecstatic mood stroked his body from the navel to the throat and wrote something on his tongue, repeating, "Awake, Mother, awake!" Then he asked Subodh to meditate. As soon as he began meditation his whole body trembled and he felt something rushing along the spinal column to his brain. He was plunged into a joy ineffable and saw a strange light in which the forms of innumerable gods and goddesses appeared and then got merged in the Infinite. The meditation gradually deepened, and he lost all outward consciousness. When he came down to the normal plane, he found Sri Ramakrishna stroking his body in the reverse order.

Sri Ramakrishna was astonished to see the deep meditation of Subodh, and learned from him that it was the result of his practice at home; for Subodh used to think of gods and goddesses, hearing of them from his mother.

After that meeting with Sri Ramakrishna Subodh would see a strange light between his eyebrows. His mother coming to know of this told him not to divulge this fact to anybody else. But seized as he was with a great spiritual hankering, Subodh promptly replied: "What harm will it do to me, mother? I do not want this light but That from which it comes."

From his very boyhood Subodh was very frank, open-minded and straightforward in his talk. These characteristics could be seen in him throughout his whole life. What he felt he would say clearly without mincing matters. One day Sri Ramakrishna asked Subodh, "What do you

think of me?" The boy unhesitatingly replied: "Many persons say many things about you. I won't believe in them unless I myself find clear proofs." As he began to come closer and closer in touch with Sri Ramakrishna the conviction gradually dawned on him that the Master was a great Saviour. So when one day Sri Ramakrishna asked Subodh to practise meditation, he replied: "I won't be able to do that. If I am to do it why did I come to you? I had better go to some other Guru." Sri Ramakrishna understood the depth of the feeling of the boy and simply smiled. But this did not mean that Subodh did not like to meditate—his whole life was one of great austerity and steadfast devotion—it only indicated his great confidence in the spiritual powers of the Master.

Subodh's straightforward way of talking led to a very interesting incident. One day the Master asked Subodh to go now and then to Mahendra Nath Gupta—afterwards known as M.—who was a great devotee and lived near Subodh's home in Calcutta. At this the boy said, "He has not been able to cut asunder his family tie, what shall I learn of God from him?" The Master enjoyed these words indicative of Subodh's great spirit of renunciation and said: "He will not talk anything of his own. He will talk only of what he learns from here." So one day Subodh went to M. and frankly narrated the conversation he had had with the Master. M. appreciated the frankness of the boy and said: "I am an insignificant person. But I live by the side of an ocean, and I keep with me ■ few pitchers of sea water. When

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

a visitor comes, I entertain him with that. What else can I speak?" The sweet and candid nature of Subodh soon made him a great favourite with M. After this Subodh was a frequent visitor at the house of M., where he would often spend long hours listening to his talks on Sri Ramakrishna.

Gradually the attraction of young Subodh for Sri Ramakrishna grew stronger and stronger, and after the passing away of the Master in 1886, he left his parental homestead and joined the monastic order organised by Swami Vivekananda at Baranagore. His monastic name was Swami Subodhananda. But because he was very young in age, Swami Vivekananda would lovingly call him "Khoka," meaning child, by which name he was also called by his brother-disciples. He was afterwards known as "Khoka Maharaj" (Child Swami).

Towards the end of 1889, along with Swami Brahmananda, Swami Subodhananda went to Benares and practised Tapasya for a few months. In 1890 they both went on a pilgrimage to Omkar, Girnar, Mount Abu, Bombay and Dwarka and after that went to Vrindavan, where they stayed for some time. He also underwent spiritual practices in different places in the Himalayan region, later went to the holy shrines of Kedar-nath and Badrinarayan twice and also visited the various holy places in South India going as far as Cape Comorin. He also went afterwards on a pilgrimage to Assam.

When Swami Vivekananda, after his return from the West, appealed to his brother-disciples

SWAMI SUBODHANANDA

to work for the spread of the Master's message and the good of humanity instead of living in seclusion, Subodhananda was one of those who placed themselves under his lead. After that he worked in various capacities for the cause of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. When the Belur Math was started in 1899, he was put in charge of the management of the monastery, in which capacity he worked for some time. During the great epidemic of plague in Calcutta in 1899, when the Ramakrishna Mission plague service was instituted, Swami Subodhananda was one of those who worked hard for the relief of the helpless and panic-stricken people.

During the great famine on the Chilka islands in Orissa in 1908, he threw himself heart and soul into the relief work. He had a very tender heart. The sight of distress and suffering always found an echo in him. He would often be found near sick-beds nursing the sick at considerable risk to his own health. On one occasion he nursed a young student suffering from smallpox of a very malignant type with such loving care and attention that it amazed all who witnessed it. Sometimes he would beg money from others in order to help poor patients with diet and medicine. Many poor families did he help with money given by devotees for his personal needs. One family near the Belur Math was saved from actual starvation by the kindness of the Swami. If he knew that a devotee was ill, he was sure to go to see him. The devotee would be surprised and overwhelmed with emotion at this unexpected

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

stroke of kindness on the part of the Swami. A young member of the Alambazar Math had to go back temporarily to his parents because of illness. Swami Subodhananda would now and then call on him and inquired about his health. That young member is now old and one of the most senior monks of the Order, but he still remembers with respectful gratitude the kindness he received in his young age from Swami Subodhananda.

Later, although he could not personally work so much, wherever he would be he would inspire people to throw themselves into the work started by Swami Vivekananda. During his last few years he made extensive tours in Bengal and Bihar and was very instrumental in spreading the message of the Master. He would even go to the outlying parts of Bengal, scorning all physical discomfort and inconvenience. But for this sacrifice on his part many in villages would not have come into intimate touch with the living fountain of the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

In religious giving also he spent himself without any reserve. During his tours he had to undergo great inconvenience and to work very hard. From morning till late at night with little time left for personal rest, he had to meet people and talk of religious things—about the message of the Master and Swami Vivekananda. But never was his face ruffled and nobody could guess that here was one who was passing through great hardship. The joy of giving was always on his face. To make disciples is to take over their

spiritual responsibility. He knew that. But he could not refuse help to anybody who sought it from him. The number of persons who got spiritual initiation from him was very large. He even initiated some children. He would say, "They will feel the efficacy when they grow up." But in this there was not the least trace of pride or self-consciousness in him. If people would approach him for initiation, he would very often say: "What do I know? I am a Khoka." He would refer them to the more senior Swamis of the Order. Only when they could not afford to go to them, did he give the spiritual help demanded of him.

In making disciples he made absolutely no distinction between the high and the low. He initiated many untouchables also. But what was more wonderful was that his affection for them was not a whit less than that for those disciples who held good position in society or were more fortunately placed in life.

Swami Subodhananda was one of the first group of trustees of the Belur Math appointed by Swami Vivekananda in 1901, and was afterwards elected Treasurer of the Ramakrishna Mission. His love for Swami Vivekananda was next to that for the Master. Swami Vivekananda also had great affection for him. Sometimes when Swami Vivekananda would become serious and none of his Gurubhais dared approach him, it was left to "Khoka" to go and break his seriousness.

Swami Subodhananda was childlike in his simplicity and singularly unassuming in his

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

behaviour. It was a fitting compliment to this aspect of his character that he was popularly known as **Khoka Maharaj**. It is said in the Bible, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." But rare are the persons who can combine in their lives the unsophisticated simplicity of a child with the high wisdom of a sage. One could see this wonderful combination in Swami Subodhananda. Swami Vivekananda and other brother-disciples greatly loved the childlike aspect of the personality of Swami Subodhananda. But they would not therefore fail to make fun now and then at his cost, taking advantage of his innocence and unsophisticated mind.

Once, while the monastery was at Alambazar, Swami Vivekananda wanted to encourage the art of public speaking among his Gurubhais. It was arranged that every week on a fixed day one of the brothers should speak. When the turn of Swami Subodhananda came, he tried his best to avoid the meeting. But Swami Vivekananda was adamant, and others were waiting with eagerness to witness the discomfiture of Subodh while lecturing. Just as Swami Subodhananda rose to speak, lo! the earth trembled, buildings shook and trees fell—it was the famous earthquake of 1897. The meeting came to an abrupt end. The young Swami escaped the ordeal of lecturing but not of the fun at his cost. "Khoka's was a 'world-shaking' speech," Swami Vivekananda said, and others joined in the joke.

Swami Vivekananda was once greatly pleased

with "Khoka" for some personal services rendered by him and said that whatever boon he would ask of him would be granted. Swami Subodhananda gravely pondered for a while and said, "Grant me this—that I may never miss my morning cup of tea." This threw the great Swami into a roar of laughter, and he said, "Yes, it is granted." Swami Subodhananda, it may be mentioned, had his morning cup of tea till the last day of his life. It is the only luxury for which he had any attraction. It was like a child's love for chocolates and lozenges. It is interesting to record in this connection that when the Master was suffering from his sore throat and everybody was worried and anxious, young Subodh in all his innocence recommended tea to the Master as a sure remedy. The Master would also have taken it but medical advice was to the contrary.

There was nothing of that awe-inspiring and austere reserve in Khoka Maharaj, which sometimes characterises a saint. He was easy of access, and everybody would feel very free with him. Many on coming in contact with him would feel his love so much that they would altogether forget the wide gulf of difference that marked their spiritual life and his. Yet he made no conscious attempt to hide the spiritual height to which he belonged. This great unostentatiousness was part and parcel of his very being. It was remarkably strange that he could mix so freely with one and all—with people of all ages and denominations—and make them his own. Many are the persons who, though not religiously minded, were drawn

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

to him simply by his love and were afterwards spiritually benefited.

The young Brahmacharins and monks of the Order found in Khoka Maharaj a great sympathiser. He took trouble to find out their difficulties and help them with advice and guidance. He would be their mouthpiece before the elders, mediate for them and shield them when they inadvertently did something wrong. One day a Brahmacharin committed a great mistake, and was asked to live outside the monastery and to get his food by begging. The Brahmacharin failed to get anything by begging except a quantity of fried gram and returned to the gate of the monastery in the evening. But he did not dare to enter the compound. Khoka Maharaj came to know of his plight, interceded on his behalf, and the young member was excused. The novices at the monastery had different kinds of work allotted to them. Often they did not know how to do it, as they had not before acquired the necessary knowledge and experience for such work. Khoka Maharaj on such occasions would come forward to help and guide them.

He was self-reliant and would not accept personal services from others, even if they were devotees or disciples. He always emphasised that one should help oneself as far as possible, and himself rigidly adhered to this principle in his everyday life. Even during times of illness he was reluctant to accept any service from others, and avoided it until it became absolutely impossible for him to manage without.

His wants were few, and he was satisfied with anything that came unsought for. His personal belongings were almost nil. He would not accept anything except what was absolutely necessary for him. In food as in other things he made no choice and ate whatever came with equal relish. This great spirit of renunciation, always evidenced in his conduct, was the result of complete dependence on God. In personal conduct as well as in conversation he put much emphasis on self-surrender to God. He very often narrated to those who came to him for guidance the following story of Shridhar Swami, the great Vaishnava saint and a commentator on the Gita :

Spurred by a spirit of renunciation, Shridhar Swami was thinking of giving up the world when his wife died giving birth to a child. Shridhar Swami felt worried about the baby and was seriously thinking how to provide for the child before retiring from the world. But he soon found that fresh problems appeared every day, and that there was no end to them. One day as he was sitting deeply absorbed with these thoughts, the egg of a lizard dropped from the roof in front of him. He felt curious and watched it keenly. The egg broke as a result of the fall, and a young lizard came out. Just then a small fly came and stood near the young lizard, which caught and swallowed it in a moment. At this the thought flashed in the mind of Shridhar Swami that there is a definite Divine plan behind creation and that every creature is provided for beforehand by God. At once all his anxiety for his

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

own child vanished, and he immediately renounced the world.

Khoka Maharaj was alike under all circumstances. External objects could never disturb the peace of his mind. He was completely indifferent to whether people showed him respect or neglected him. One could visibly see that he was far above these things. His self-effacement was complete.

His spiritual life was marked by as great a directness as his external life was remarkable for its simplicity. He had no philosophical problems of his own to solve. The Ultimate Reality was a fact to him. When he would talk of God, one felt that here was a man to whom God was a greater reality than earthly relatives. He once said, "God can be realised much more tangibly than a man feels the presence of the companion with whom he is walking." The form of his personal worship was singularly free from ritualistic observances. While entering the shrine he was not obsessed by any awe and wonder, but would act as if he was going to a very near relation; and while performing worship he would not care to recite memorised texts. His relationship with God was just as free and natural as human relationship. He realised the goodness of God, and so he was always optimistic in his views. For this reason his words would always bring cheer and strength to weary or despondent souls. Intellectual snobs or philosophical pedants were bewildered to see the conviction with which he talked on problems which they had not been able to solve, all their pride and self-conceit notwithstanding.

SWAMI SUBODHANANDA

Towards the end he suffered from various physical ailments, but his spiritual conviction was never shaken. While he was on his death-bed he said, "When I think of Him, I become forgetful of all physical sufferings." During this time the Upanishads used to be read out to him. While listening he would warm up and of his own accord talk of various deep spiritual truths. On one such occasion he said: "The world with all its enjoyments seems like a heap of ashes. The mind feels no attraction at all for all these things."

While death was slowly approaching he was unperturbed, absolutely free from any anxiety. Rather he was ready and anxious to meet the Beloved. The night before he passed away he said, "My last prayer is that the blessings of the Lord be always on the Order." The great soul passed away in December, 1932.

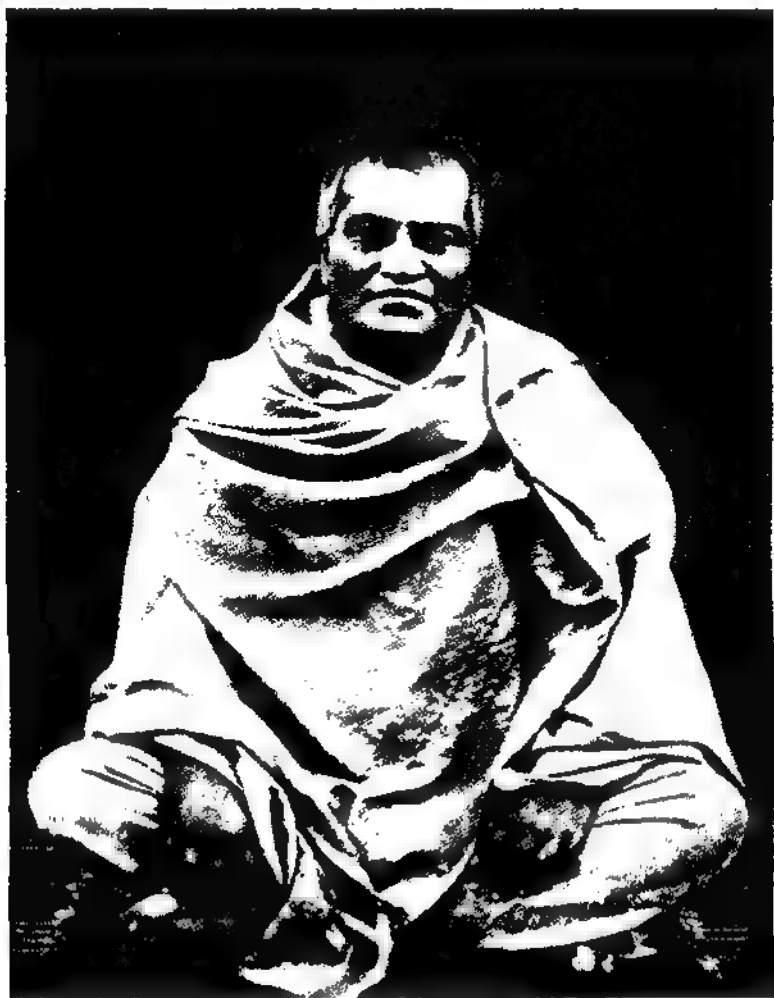
XII

SWAMI SHIVANANDA

Swami Shivananda, more popularly known as Mahapurusha Maharaj, was a personality of great force, rich in distinctive colour and individual quality. His leonine stature and dauntless vigour, his stolid indifference to praise or blame, his spontaneous moods and his profound serenity in times of storm and stress, invested with a singular appropriateness his monastic name which recalls the classical attributes of the great god Shiva.

He was born sometime in the fifties of the nineteenth century on the 11th day of the dark fortnight in the Indian month of Agrahayana (Nov.-Dec.). The exact year of his birth is obscure. The Swami himself with his characteristic indifference to such matters never remembered it. His father had indeed prepared an elaborate horoscope for his son, but the latter threw it away into the Ganges when he chose the life of renunciation.

His early name, before he took orders, was Tarak Nath Ghoshal. He came of a respectable and influential family of Baraset. One of his ancestors, Harakrishna Ghoshal, was a Dewan of the Krishnanagar Raj. His father, Ramkanai Ghoshal, was not only a successful lawyer with a substantial income but a noted Tantrika as well. Much of his earnings was spent in removing the wants of holy men and of poor and helpless



Swami Shivananda

students. It was not unusual for him to provide board and lodging for twenty-five to thirty students at a time in his house. Latterly, when he became a deputy collector, his income fell, which forced him to limit his charities much against his wish. Subsequently he rose to be the assistant Dewan of Cooch Behar.

We have already referred to Ramkanai Ghoshal as a great Tantrika, and it will be interesting to recall here an incident which connected him with Sri Ramakrishna. For some time he was legal adviser to Rani Rasmani, the founder of the Kali temple of Dakshineswar, where he came to be acquainted with Sri Ramakrishna during a visit on business matters. Sri Ramakrishna's personality greatly attracted him, and whenever the latter came to Dakshineswar he never missed seeing him. At one time during intense spiritual practices Sri Ramakrishna suffered from an acute burning sensation all over his body, which medicines failed to cure. One day Sri Ramakrishna asked Ramkanai Ghoshal if the latter could suggest a remedy. Ramkanai Ghoshal recommended the wearing of his Ishtakavacha (an amulet containing the name of the chosen deity) on his arm. This instantly relieved him.

From his early boyhood Tarak showed unmistakable signs of what the future was to unfold. There was something in him which marked him out from his associates. It was not mere bold conduct and straightforward manners. Though a talented boy he showed very little interest in his studies. An as yet vague longing gnawed at his

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

heart and made him forget himself from time to time and be lost in flights of reverie. Early he became drawn to meditative practices. More and more as days went on his mind gravitated towards the vast inner world of spirit. Often in the midst of play and laughter and boyish merriment he would suddenly be seized by an austere and grave mood which filled his companions with awe and wonder. It is not surprising that his studies did not extend beyond school. Tarak like scores of other young men was drawn to the Brahmo Samaj, thanks to the influence of Keshab Chandra Sen. And though he continued his visits to the Samaj for some time his hunger was hardly satisfied with what he got there.

Meanwhile his father's earnings fell, and Tarak had to look for a job. He went to Delhi. There he used to spend hours in discussing religious subjects in the house of a friend named Prasanna. One day he asked the latter about Samadhi, to which Prasanna replied that Samadhi was a very rare phenomenon which very few experienced, but that he knew at least one person who had certainly experienced it and mentioned the name of Sri Ramakrishna. At last Tarak heard about one who could teach him what he wanted to know. He waited patiently for the day when he would be able to meet Sri Ramakrishna.

Not long after, Tarak returned to Calcutta and accepted a job in the firm of Messrs. Mackinnon Mackenzie and Co. He was still continuing his visits to the Brahmo Samaj. About this time, however, he came to hear a good deal about Sri

Ramakrishna from a relative of Ramchandra Dutt, a householder devotee of Sri Ramakrishna. The more his heart yearned for deeper things the less did platitudes and cheap sentiments satisfy him. He had not to wait much longer before he met the person who was to satisfy the profound needs of his soul.

One day in 1880 or 1881 he came to know that Sri Ramakrishna would come to Ramchandra Dutt's house in Calcutta on a visit. He decided to seize the opportunity of meeting him on the occasion. When the long-desired evening came he went to Ram Babu's house where he found Sri Ramakrishna talking in a semi-conscious state to an audience in a crowded room. Tarak hung on his words. He had long been eager to hear about Samadhi, and what was his surprise when he found from the few words he caught that the Master had been talking on the very subject that day. He was beside himself with joy. He left the room quietly some time after. It had made a profound impression upon him. Tarak began to feel an irresistible attraction for Sri Ramakrishna and resolved to meet him the next Saturday at Dakshineswar.

It will be proper to reproduce here his own description of the tendencies of his boyhood and youth and his first contact with Sri Ramakrishna. Later in life he wrote: "Even as a child I had an inherent tendency towards spiritual life and an innate feeling that enjoyment was not the object of life. As I grew in age and experience these two ideas took a firmer hold of my mind. I went

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

about the city of Calcutta seeking knowledge of God among its various religious societies and temples. But I could not find real satisfaction anywhere; none of them emphasised the beauty of renunciation, nor could I discover a single man among them, who was possessed of true spiritual wisdom. Then in 1880 or 1881, I heard about Sri Ramakrishna and went to see him in the house of one of his devotees at Calcutta. This was the time when Swami Vivekananda and those other disciples of Sri Ramakrishna who afterwards renounced the world to carry on his divine mission, had begun to gather round him. On the first day of my visit, I saw Sri Ramakrishna passing into Samadhi; and when he returned to normal consciousness he spoke in detail about Samadhi and its nature. I felt in my inmost heart that here was a man who had indeed realised God, and I surrendered myself for ever at his blessed feet."

At that time Tarak did not know much about Dakshineswar. He, however, managed to reach the place in the company of a friend. The evening service was about to begin when he arrived. Tarak entered the paved courtyard and began to look for Sri Ramakrishna. Coming to his room he found Sri Ramakrishna seated there. Tarak was overpowered with a deep feeling as soon as he saw him. He felt as if it was his own mother who was sitting yonder in front of him. After the usual preliminary inquiries the Master asked if he had seen him the previous Saturday in the house of Ramchandra. Tarak replied in the affirmative. "In what do you believe," asked

the Master, "in God with form or without form?" "In God without form," replied Tarak. "You can't but admit the Divine Shakti also," said the Master. Soon he proceeded towards the Kali temple and asked the boy to follow him. The evening service was going on with the accompaniment of delightful music. Coming to the temple Sri Ramakrishna prostrated himself before the image of the Mother. Tarak at first hesitated to follow the example, because, according to the ideas of the Samaj which he frequented, the image was no more than inert stone. But suddenly the thought flashed in his mind: "Why should I have such petty ideas? I hear God is omnipresent, He dwells everywhere. Then He must be present in the stone image as well." No sooner had the idea flashed in his mind than he prostrated himself before the image.

The Master's practised eye judged at sight the boy's mettle. He repeatedly asked him to stay overnight. "Stay here to-night," he said, "you can't gain any lasting advantage by the chance visit of a day. You must come here often." Tarak begged to be excused as he had already decided to stay with his friend. When he came again Sri Ramakrishna asked him for some ice. Not knowing where to get it, Tarak spoke of it to a friend who was acquainted with Surendra, a householder devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, and the latter procured some and sent it to the Master.

From that time on Tarak began to visit Dakshineswar frequently. His intimacy with the Master deepened. One day Sri Ramakrishna asked

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Tarak: "Look here, I don't ordinarily inquire the whereabouts of anyone who comes here. I only look into his heart and read his feelings. But the very sight of you has made me realise that you belong to this place, and I feel a desire to know something about your father and people at home." He was agreeably surprised to learn that Ramkanai Ghoshal was his father, and telling of the service the latter had done him, wished that he might see him again. Some time later Ramkanai Ghoshal went to Dakshineswar and prostrated himself before Sri Ramakrishna, who placed his foot on his head and entered into Samadhi. Ramkanai Ghoshal eagerly grasped the Master's feet and burst into tears.

One day—it was probably Tarak's third or fourth visit to Dakshineswar—Sri Ramakrishna took him aside and asked him to put out his tongue. Then he wrote something on it. It had a strange effect upon the boy. He felt an overpowering feeling taking hold of him. The vast world of sense melted before his eyes, his mind was drawn deep within, and his whole being became absorbed in a trance. This happened twice again, once in the presence of Swami Brahmananda.

Association with the Master sharpened Tarak's hunger for religious experiences. Long afterwards he described the state of his mind at that period in the following words: "I often felt inclined to cry in the presence of the Master. One night I wept profusely in front of the Kali temple. The Master was anxious at my absence and when I

went to him he said, 'God favours those who weep for Him. Tears thus shed wash away the sins of former births.' Another day I was meditating at the Panchavati when the Master came near. No sooner had he cast his glance at me than I burst into tears. He stood still without uttering a word. A sort of creeping sensation passed through me, and I began to tremble all over. The Master congratulated me on attaining this state and said it was the outcome of divine emotion. He then took me to his room and gave me something to eat. He could arouse the latent spiritual powers of a devotee at a mere glance."

From the very first meeting with Sri Ramakrishna Tarak felt in his inmost heart that he had at last found one who could guide his steps to the doors of the Infinite. Intuitively he felt that the vague aspirations of his boyhood and youth were realised in the personality of Sri Ramakrishna. The Master appeared to him to be the consummation of all religions. To know him was to know God. With the growth of this conviction his devotion to the Master increased a hundredfold. The Master also made him his own by his immeasurable love. Tarak felt that parental love was as nothing in comparison. In a letter to an inquirer towards the end of his life he wrote about the Master: "I have not yet come to a final understanding whether he was a man or superman, a god or God Himself. But I have known him to be a man of complete self-effacement, master of the highest renunciation, possessed of supreme wisdom, and the very incarnation

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

of love; and, as with the passing of days I am getting better and better acquainted with the domain of spirituality and feeling the infinite extent and depth of Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual moods, the conviction is growing in me that to compare him with God, as God is popularly understood, would be minimising and lowering his supreme greatness. I have seen him showering his love equally on men and women, on the learned and the ignorant, and on saints and sinners, and evincing earnest and unceasing solicitude for the relief of their misery and for their attainment of infinite peace by realising the Divine. And I dare say that the world has not seen another man of his type in modern times so devoted to the welfare of mankind."

Family circumstances forced Tarak Nath to marry about this time. But the life of the world was not for him. His innate purity, passion for holiness, and the Master's grace never allowed him to fall a victim to the snares of the world. The perfect purity of his married life earned for him the popular name of Mahapurusha from the great Swami Vivekananda.

Tarak continued his visits to Dakshineswar till Sri Ramakrishna fell seriously ill in 1885, which necessitated his removal first to Calcutta and then to Cossipore garden-house. All these years the Master had been quietly shaping the character of his disciples, instructing them not only in religious matters but also in the everyday duties of life. Cossipore, however, formed the most decisive period in the lives of the disciples of Sri

the Master and loyalty to common ideals forged an indissoluble bond of unity among these young aspirants. As time went on the boys began to stay entirely at the garden-house to serve the Master. Much of their time was devoted to discussions on religious subjects. All this set ablaze the great fire of renunciation smouldering in them, and they yearned for realisation.

The wife of Tarak had died at this time. Tragic as was the death of Tarak's young wife, it removed the last obstacle which stood in the way of his embracing a life of renunciation. Tarak decided to renounce the world even while the Master was present in the flesh. With this end in view he approached his father to bid him farewell. As the son disclosed his intention the father became deeply moved and tears began to stream down his face. He asked Tarak to go to the family shrine and to make prostration there. Then the father, placing his hand on his son's head, blessed him saying: "May you realise God. I have tried very hard myself. I even thought of renouncing the world, but that was not to be. I bless you, therefore, that you may find God." Tarak related all this to the Master, who was much pleased and expressed his hearty approval.

After the passing away of the Master, the small group of disciples clustered round the monastery of Baranagore. The first to join were Tarak, Swami Advaitananda and Swami

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Adbhutananda. The Master's death had created a great void in the hearts of the disciples, who began to spend most of their time in intense meditation in order to feel the living presence of the Master. Often they would leave the monastery and wander from place to place, away from crowded localities and familiar faces. It was not a mere wander-lust that scattered this little group of young Sannyasins to all points of the compass. But while the desire for realising God consumed them within, they moved from place to place enduring all kinds of privation and hardship. Food was not available always, and too often the only shelter was the roof provided by the spreading branches of a road-side tree. Hunger and cold, thirst and heat were their lot for years. This period of their lives, which stretched over a number of years and which was packed with severe austerities and great miracles of faith, out of the mighty fire of which was forged the powerful characters the world later saw, is mostly a sealed book. With their utter disregard for false values of all kinds they were usually reticent about their personal experiences. Only on rare occasions could one catch glimpses of these days of faith and suffering.

Towards the end of his life Swami Shivananda, the name received by Tarak when he became a monk, one day chanced to lift a corner of the pall of mystery which lay over these stormy years. "Often it happened," he said, "that I had only one piece of cloth to cover myself with. I used to wear half of it and wrap the other half round the

upper part of my body. In those days of wandering I would often bathe in the waters of wells, and then I used to wear a piece of loin-cloth and let my only piece of cloth dry. Many a night I slept under trees. At that time the spirit of renunciation was aflame and the idea of bodily comfort never entered the mind. Though I travelled mostly without means, thanks to the grace of the Lord, I never fell into danger. The Master's living presence used to protect me always. Often I did not know where the next meal would come from. ...At that period a deep dissatisfaction gnawed within, and the heart yearned for God. The company of men repelled me. I used to avoid roads generally used. At the approach of night I would find some suitable place just to lay my head on and pass the night alone with my thoughts."

Some indication of Tarak's bent of mind at this period can be had from a few reminiscences which have come down to us. He had a natural slant towards the orthodox and austere path of knowledge which placed little value on popular religious attitudes. He avoided ceremonious observances and disregarded emotional approaches to religion. He keyed up his mind to the formless aspect of the Divine. This stern devotion to Jnana continued for some time. Deep down in his heart, however, lay his boundless love for the Master which nothing could affect for a moment. In later years with the broadening of experience his heart opened to the infinite beauties of spiritual emotion.

During his days of itineracy Swami Shivananda visited various places in North India. In

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

the course of these travels he also went to Almora where he became acquainted with a rich man of the place named Lala Badrilal Shah, who speedily became a great admirer of the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna and took great care of them whenever he happened to meet them. Here, towards the latter part of 1893, the year of Swami Vivekananda's journey to America, Tarak also met Mr. E. T. Sturdy, an Englishman interested in Theosophy. The Swami's personality and talks greatly attracted him. Mr. Sturdy came to hear of Swami Vivekananda's activities in the West from him and on his return to England he invited Swami Vivekananda there and made arrangements for the preaching of Vedanta in England.

With the return of Swami Vivekananda from the West in 1897, Swami Shivananda's days of itineracy came to an end. He went to Madras to receive the Swami and returned with him to Calcutta. In the same year, at the request of Swami Vivekananda, he went to Ceylon and preached Vedanta for about a year. There he used to hold classes on the Gita, and the *Raja Yoga*, which became popular with the local educated community including a number of Europeans. One of his students, Mrs. Picket, to whom he gave the name of Haripriya, was specially trained by him so as to qualify her to teach Vedanta to the Europeans. She later went to Australia and New Zealand at the direction of the Swami and succeeded in attracting interested students in both the countries. The Swami

returned to the Math in 1898, which was then housed at Nilambar Babu's garden.

In 1899 plague broke out in an epidemic form in Calcutta. Swami Vivekananda, who was at Darjeeling at the time, hastened down to the plains as soon as the news reached him and asked Swami Shivananda and others to organise relief work for the sick. The Swami put forth his best efforts without the least thought for his personal safety. About this time a landslip did considerable damage to property at Darjeeling. He also collected some money for helping those who were affected by it.

The natural drive of his mind was, however, for a life of contemplation, and so he went again to the Himalayas to taste once more the delight and peace of meditation. Here he spent some years, although he would occasionally come down to the Math for a visit. About this time Swami Vivekananda asked him to found a monastery in the Himalayas. Although the desire of the Swami could not be realised at the time, Swami Shivananda remembered his wish and years afterwards, in 1915, he laid the beginnings of a monastery at Almora, which was completed by Swami Turiyananda.

In 1900 he accompanied Swami Vivekananda on the latter's visit to Mayavati. While returning to the plains, Swami Vivekananda left him at Pilibhit with a request that he should collect funds for the maintenance and improvement of the Belur Math. The Swami stayed back and raised some money.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Shortly before Swami Vivekananda passed away the Raja of Bhinga gave him Rs. 500 for preaching Vedanta. Swamiji handed the money over to Swami Shivananda asking him to start an Ashrama with it at Benares, which he did in 1902.

The seven long years which he spent at this Benares Ashrama formed a memorable chapter of his life. Outwardly, of course, there was no spectacular achievement. The Ashrama grew up, not so much as a centre of great social activity, but as a school of hard discipline and rigorous Tapasya for the development of individual character as in the hermitages of old. Here we are confronted with an almost insurmountable obstacle in the way of presenting the life-story of spiritual geniuses. The most active period of their lives is devoid of events in popular estimation. It is hidden away from the public eye and spent in producing those invisible and intangible commodities whose value cannot be measured in terms of material goods. When they appear again they are centres of great and silent forces which often leave their imprint on centuries. Realisation of God is not an event in the sense in which the discovery of a star or an element is an event, which resounds through all the continents. But one who has solved the riddle of life is a far greater benefactor of humanity than, say, the discoverer of highest scientific truths.

Anxious times were ahead of Swami Shivananda; the funds of the Benares Ashrama were soon depleted. At times nobody knew wherefrom the expenses of the day would come. The Swami,

however, carried on unruffled and the clouds lifted after a while. Most of his time was spent in intense spiritual practices. He would scarcely stir out of the Ashrama, and day and night he would be in a high spiritual mood. The life in the Ashrama was one of severe discipline and hardship. The inmates hardly enjoyed full meals for months, and there was not much clothing to lessen the severity of the winter. He himself used to pass most of the nights on a small bench. In the winter months he would usually get up at about three in the morning and light a Dhuni fire in one of the rooms, before which they would sit for meditation, which often continued far into the morning. During these times Swami Saradananda, the then Secretary of the Mission, would press him hard to try to collect funds for the local Home of Service and would say jocosely, "Will mere meditation bring money?" But the Swami could not be moved from the tenor of his life.

For some time he opened a school at the Ashrama, where he himself taught English to a group of local boys. About this time he translated Swami Vivekananda's Chicago lectures into Hindusthani so that Swamiji's ideas might spread among the people. He continued to look after the affairs of the Ashrama till 1909, when he returned to Belur and lived there for some time. In 1910 he went on a pilgrimage to Amarnath in company with Swami Turiyananda and Swami Premananda. On his return he fell seriously ill with dysentery, which proved very obstinate. He became specially careful as regards food after this

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

and began to observe a strict regimen, which continued till the end and to which his long life was in no small measure due.

In 1917 Swami Premananda who used to manage the affairs of the Math at Belur fell seriously ill, and his duties came to rest on the shoulders of Swami Shivananda, who was one of the original trustees of the Belur Math. And in 1922, after the passing away of Swami Brahmananda, he was made the President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, in which post he continued till the end of his life. Shortly before this he had been to Dacca and Mymensingh in response to an invitation. This tour started a new phase in his long career which has left a very profound impression upon all who came in contact with him during this period. Large crowds flocked to him at places in Dacca and Mymensingh to hear him talk on spiritual matters, and for the first time he began to initiate persons into spiritual life at the earnest appeal of several devotees, though at first he was much against it.

In 1924 and 1927 he went on two long tours to the South, during which he formally opened the centres at Bombay, Nagpur and Ootacamund and initiated a large number of persons into religious life. The hill station of Ootacamund appealed to him greatly, and here he spent some time in a high spiritual mood. In 1925 during the winter he went to Deoghar accompanied by a large number of monks from the Belur Math to open a new building of the local Ramakrishna Mission. He stayed there for a little over three weeks which

was a period of unalloyed joy and bliss for all who happened to be there. Wherever he went he carried an atmosphere of delight around him. Monks and devotees thronged round him morning and evening and for hours the conversations went on.

After 1930 his health broke down greatly, though he could still take short walks. What a cataract of disasters had come upon him since 1927—loss of the comrades of old days one after another, trouble and defections, illness and physical disabilities ! But nothing could for a moment dim the brightness of his burning flame of reliance on God. They only brought into high relief the greatness of his spiritual qualities. At night after meals he would usually pass an hour or so all alone except for the presence of an attendant or two who used to be near. And whenever he was alone he seemed to be immersed in a profound spiritual mood. He would occasionally break the silence by gently uttering the Master's name. The mood would recur whenever in the midst of an almost uninterrupted flow of visitors and devotees he found a little time to himself. In the midst of terrible physical suffering he would radiate joy and peace all around. Not once did anyone hear him utter a syllable of complaint against the torments which assailed the flesh. To all inquiries about his health his favourite reply was, "Janaki is all right so long she is able to take the name of Rama." Physicians who came to treat him were amazed at his buoyant spirits which nothing could depress. Sometimes he would

Age, which diminishes our physical and mental vigour, serves only to heighten the force and charm of a spiritual personality. The last years of Swami Shivananda's life were days of the real majesty of a spiritual sovereign. The assumption of the vast spiritual responsibilities of the great office tore off the austere mask of reserve and rugged taciturnity which so long hid his tender heart and broad sympathy. All these years thousands upon thousands came to him, men and women, young and old, rich and poor, high and low, the homeless and the outcast, men battered by fate and reeling under the thousand and one miseries to which man is prey, and went away lifted up in spirits. A kind look, a cheering word, and an impalpable something which was nevertheless most real, put new hope and energy into persons whose lives had almost been blasted away by frustrations and despair. He cheerfully bore all discomfort and hardship in the service of the helpless and the needy. Even during the last illness which deprived him of the use of speech and half of his limbs, the same anxiety to be of help to all was plain, and his kindly look and the gentle movement of his left hand in blessing, and, above all, his holy presence did more to brace up their drooping spirits than countless words contained in books could ever do.

During his term of office the work of the Mission steadily expanded. The ideas of the Master spread to new lands, and centres were opened not only in different parts of India but also in various foreign countries. He was, however, no sectarian with limited sympathy. All kinds of work, social, national, or religious, received his blessings. Labourers in different fields came to him and went away heartened by words of cheer and sympathy. His love was too broad to be limited by sectional interests; it extended to every place and to every movement where good was being done. Are not all who toil for freedom and justice, for moral and religious values, for the removal of human want and suffering, for raising the material and cultural level of the masses, doing the Master's work? He was no mere recluse living away from human interests and aspirations, away from the currents of everyday life. His was an essentially modern mind keenly aware of the suffering of the poor and the downtrodden. His clear reason unbefogged by sectional interests could grasp the truth behind all movements for making the lot of the common man happy and cheerful. When the Madras Council was considering the Religious Endowment Bill which aimed at a better management of the finances of the religious Maths, a Mohunt of a Math in Madras approached him seeking his help for fighting the measure because it touched the vested interests. But the Swami told him point-blank that ■ monastery should not simply hoard money, but should see that it came to the use of society.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

When news of flood and famine reached him, he became anxious for the helpless victims and would not rest till relief had been organised.

Though all kinds of good work found him sympathetic, he never failed to stress the spirit which should be at the back of all activities. One who witnesses the drama of life from the summit of realisation views its acts in a light denied to common understanding. Our toils and strivings, our joys and delights, our woes and tears are seen in their true proportion from the vast perspective of the Eternal. Work yoked to true understanding is a means for the unfoldment of the divine within man. So his advice was always: Behind work there should be meditation; without meditation work cannot be performed in a way which conduces to spiritual growth. Nor is work nicely performed without having a spiritual background. He would say, "Fill your mind in the morning so much with the thoughts of God that one point of the compass of your mind will always be towards God though you are engaged in various distracting activities."

His own life was a commentary on what he preached. Though he soared on the heights of spiritual wisdom he was to the last rigid in attending to the customary devotions for which he had scarcely any need for himself. Until the time he was too weak to go out of his room, every dawn found him in the shrine room meditating at a fixed hour. In the evening, perhaps, he would be talking to a group of people when the bell for evening service rang. He would at once become

silent and lost in deep contemplation, while those who sat round him found their minds stilled and enjoyed a state of tranquillity which comes only from deep meditation.

Not only did his life stand out as the fulfilment of the ideal aspirations of the devotee, as an ever-present source of inspiration, but his kindness and pity issued forth in a thousand channels to the afflicted and the destitute. Not all who came to him were in urgent need of spiritual comfort. Empty stomachs and naked bodies made them far more conscious of their physical wants than of the higher needs of the soul. His charities flowed in a steady stream to scores of persons groaning under poverty. Perhaps there came to him one whose daughter had fallen seriously ill, but who did not know how to provide the expenses for her treatment. There was another who had lost his job and stared helplessly at the future. Such petitions and their fulfilment were an almost regular occurrence during his last years, not to mention also his constant gifts of cloths and blankets, etc., to hundreds of people.

In the days of his physical decline the grand old man, whom illness had confined to bed, was like a great patriarch, a paterfamilias, affectionately watching over the welfare of his vast brood. His love showed itself in a hundred ways. If anyone of his numerous devotees or members of the monastery fell sick he never failed to make anxious inquiries about him. If any of the devotees did not turn up on the usual day at the Math,

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

it never failed to attract his notice. And when the devotees came to the Math, even their petty needs and comforts engaged his attention. But very few of them came to know of this.

His numerous children, who felt secure in his affectionate care, went about their duties full of the delight of living. One night after the meal some of the members of the monastery at Belur were making fun and laughing loudly in the inner verandah of the groundfloor of the main Math building. The noise of laughter rose up and could be heard in Swami Shivananda's room. He smiled a little at this and said softly: "The boys are laughing much and seem to be happy. They have left their hearth and home in search of bliss. Master! make them blissful." What an amount of feeling lay behind these few tender words of prayer!

His health, which was already shattered, broke down still more and beyond recovery in May, 1933, when he had an attack of apoplexy which deprived him of the use of half of his body including speech. He passed away on February 20, 1934, leaving a memory which is like a golden dream flung suddenly from one knows not where into this harsh world of reality.

The real is that which is an object of experience. To Swami Shivananda God and religion were not vague words or distant ideals, but living realities. Lives like his light up the dark process of history and point to the divine goal towards which humanity is travelling with growing knowledge.

XIII

SWAMI AKHANDANANDA

Swami Akhandananda, or Gangadhar Ghatak, as he was called in his pre-monastic life, came of a respectable Brahmin family of Baghbazar, Calcutta. Even from his boyhood he was of a deeply religious turn of mind, and had extremely orthodox habits. He bathed several times a day, cooked his one daily meal himself, read the Gita and other scriptures, and regularly practised meditation. This was his mode of life when he first came in contact with Sri Ramakrishna. Their meeting was in 1884, at Dakshineswar, which he visited in the company of his friend Harinath, the future Swami Turiyananda. Sri Ramakrishna, as was customary with him, received him cordially, and asked him if he had seen him before. The boy answered that he had: when he had been very young, at the house of Dinanath Bose, a devotee who lived at Baghbazar. The Master made him stay overnight, and when he was taking leave the next morning, Sri Ramakrishna asked the boy, in his characteristic way, to come again. Then began that close association between the Master and the disciple which afterwards ripened into a strong urge for renunciation of the world on the part of Gangadhar, and his dedication to the service of God in man. Every time he visited Dakshineswar he was charmed to see some

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

new phase of Sri Ramakrishna's God-intoxicated life. He felt the silent transforming influence of his love and received practical instructions from him on spirituality. Under this tutelage, Gangadhar gradually dropped his over-orthodox observances, which the Master described as "oldish," saying: "Look at Naren (Swami Vivekananda). He has such prominent eyes! He chews a hundred betel-leaves a day, and eats whatever he gets. But his mind is deeply introspective. He goes along the streets of Calcutta seeing houses and chattels, horses and carriages, and everything as full of God! Go and see him one day. He lives at Simla (a district of Calcutta)." The next day Gangadhar saw Narendra Nath and at once understood the truth of Sri Ramakrishna's remarks. He reported his impressions to the Master, who wondered how the boy could learn so much in a single interview. Gangadhar said: "On reaching there, I noticed those prominent eyes of his and found him reading a voluminous English work. The room was full of dirt, but he scarcely noticed anything. His mind seemed to be away beyond this world." Sri Ramakrishna advised him to visit Narendra Nath often. This was the foundation of his abiding devotion and allegiance to Swami Vivekananda, the hero of his life.

Gangadhar went often to Dakshineswar and lost no opportunity of serving the Master. This attained its climax during the prolonged illness of the Master (cancer of the throat) which necessitated his removal to the villa at Cossipore,

SWAMI AKHANDANANDA

where he finally entered into Mahasamadhi in August, 1886. In the course of those last few months, Sri Ramakrishna succeeded in binding his pure and selfless band of young disciples together in indissoluble fraternal ties, and placed them under the care of Narendra Nath as leader. Shortly after the Baranagore monastery had been started, Gangadhar joined the all-renouncing group of monks and led an ascetic life with them, determined to realise the highest truth as taught by Sri Ramakrishna, or die in the attempt. From now on Gangadhar became Swami Akhandananda ("one who has his bliss in the indivisible Brahman"). No amount of privation could deflect them, even by a hair's breadth, from their life of absorption in God. It was the traditional ideal of monasticism venerated in India from time immemorial.

Gangadhar, not coming to be confined to one place, and fired with the ideal of leading the unfettered life of a wandering monk, started early in 1887 on a long pilgrimage to the Himalayas; and after visiting sacred Kedarnath and Badrinarayan he crossed over to Tibet, where he lived at Lhasa and elsewhere for three years, returning to India in 1890. After his return, he was full of the grandeur of the Himalayas and Tibet, had frequent correspondence with Swami Vivekananda, then at Gazipur, and succeeded in inducing the latter to visit those regions in his company. Accordingly, Swami Akhandananda came to the Baranagore monastery, and after spending a few happy months with his brother-disciples, sharing

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

his experience with them, he set out in July, 1890, with Swami Vivekananda on a pilgrimage to the Himalayas. Visiting important places on the way they reached Almora, whence they proceeded to Karnaprayag on the route to Badrinath. But illness of the one or the other prevented their proceeding farther, and they returned after some weeks, *via* Tehri, to Dehra Dun, whence Swami Akhandananda went to Meerut for treatment. Soon after this he was again joined by Swami Vivekananda, who had been taken seriously ill while practising austerities at Rishikesh, the great resort of monks at the foot of the Himalayas. He brought with him some of the other brother-disciples, including Swami Brahmananda. When, after five delightful months of association of the brothers, Swami Vivekananda, impelled by an inner hankering to remain alone, left them to make a tour of the country as a wandering monk, Swami Akhandananda, unable to bear his separation, followed him from province to province, determined to find him. But at every place he visited he got the disconcerting news that Swami Vivekananda had left it a few days ago. He persisted in his search with unflagging resolve, till at last he discovered the object of his search at a port called Cutch Mandvi in distant Cutch. He, however, yielded to the leader's earnest desire to be left alone, and each continued his pilgrimage separately.

Shortly after Swami Vivekananda's departure for America in May, 1893, Swami Akhandananda learnt from his brother-disciples, Swamis

SWAMI AKHANDANANDA

Brahmananda and Turiyananda, at Mt. Abu that the real motive of the leader's journey to the West was to find bread for the hungry masses of India. For the sight of their crushing poverty and misery was too much for him, and he considered it absurd to preach religion to them without first improving their material condition. This communication made little impression upon Swami Akhandananda at the time. Then he fell ill and went for a change to Khetri, where, after six months' rest and treatment, he regained his health. But those months gave him ample opportunity to come in close touch with all sections of people, high and low, rich and poor, and it was then that he realised the truth of Swami Vivekananda's words. Now himself also burning with the desire to serve the poor and helpless masses, he wrote to the Swami in America asking for his permission. The encouraging reply he received pushed him on, and in 1894 he began his campaign against poverty. He found that at the root of it all was the appalling ignorance of the masses. Hence education became his first objective. He moved from door to door impressing upon the residents of Khetri the need of educating their children, and succeeded by strenuous efforts in raising the strength of the local High School from 80 to 257, as well as in improving the teaching staff. He next visited the villages around Khetri and started five Primary Schools for the village boys. Seeing all this the Maharaja of Khetri afterwards made an annual grant of Rs. 5,000/- for the spread of education in his territory. At the

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

instance of the Swami, the Sanskrit School at Khetri was converted into a Vedic School, and as the students were too poor to purchase books, the Swami raised subscriptions, purchased books and had them distributed free to the boys by the Political Agent. He also induced the Maharaja to lift the ban against the admittance of his poorer subjects from seeing him on Durbar days.

Next year the Swami happened to visit Udaipur, where he was much pained to see the condition of the Bhils, the aboriginal inhabitants of the place. With the help of a friend he had them sumptuously fed one day. He also took great pains to start a Middle English School at Nathadwara, and founded at Alwar and other places of Rajputana a number of Societies which regularly discussed useful social, religious and educational topics. Finally he left Rajputana and returned early in 1895 to the monastery, which was then at Alambazar.

Here also he was not idle. Whenever a cholera case was reported in the neighbourhood, he would run to the spot and try his utmost to nurse the patient to recovery without any regard for personal safety. A few months later, he started northwards on foot along the Ganges till he came to a village some twenty miles from Berhampore, in the district of Murshidabad, where he met a poor Mohammedan girl weeping. On inquiry he learnt that she had broken her pitcher, the only one in the family, and there was no means to replace it. The Swami had only four annas with him. He bought a pitcher from a shop for the girl

SWAMI AKHANDANANDA

and gave her half an anna worth of popped rice to eat. While he was resting there, a dozen emaciated old women in rags surrounded him for food. He immediately spent his little balance in purchasing some food for them. Shortly after this he came to learn that a famished old woman was lying sick and helpless in that village. He at once went there and did what he could to help her.

This was his first contact with famine. The farther he proceeded, the more frightful spectacles he met, till at Mahula he cried halt. He resolved not to move from the place until he had relieved the famine-stricken people, and so wrote to the Alambazar Math asking for help. Swami Vivekananda, who had returned to India about three months before, after his four years of epoch-making work in the West, was staying there at the time. He despatched two of the monks with some money to the scene. And so on May 15, 1897, the first famine relief work of the Ramakrishna Mission was inaugurated with Mahula and Panchgaon as centres, and it lasted for about a year. In the course of it Swami Akhandananda had to take charge of two orphans, and the idea of founding an orphanage first entered his mind. With encouragement from the district officers, the Swami, after taking temporary care of a number of orphans, founded in May, 1898, at Mahula, the orphanage entitled the Ramakrishna Ashrama, which was removed shortly after to a rented house at Sargachhi. After continuing there for thirteen years the Ashrama was moved to its own

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

premises in the same village, which it has been occupying since March, 1913.

The Swami, from the foundation of this institution to the last day of his life, bestowed his best attention on its improvement, and it has saved a good number of orphan boys from starvation, illiteracy and degradation. Many of these have been put in a position to earn an honest living. Under the Swami's supervision, the Ashrama has all these years been conducting a day and a night school for the village boys and adults and an outdoor dispensary, which has afterwards developed considerably and treats thousands of sick people every year. From 1900 to 1910 the Ashrama ran a full-fledged industrial school, teaching weaving, sewing and carpentry, as also for part of the period sericulture, which was the pride of the locality. The handicrafts turned out by its boys won first prizes for several successive years at the Banjetia Industrial Exhibition organised by Maharaja Manindra Chandra Nandi of Cossimbazar, who, by the way, was a staunch patron of the institution. Unfortunately, for want of accommodation the industrial school had to be discontinued.

The Swami not only attended to the general education of the Ashrama boys, but also paid due regard to their spiritual training, the chanting of prayers morning and evening being compulsory for them. Select passages from the sacred books like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were read and explained to them. Orphans were admitted into the Ashrama without any distinction

SWAMI AKHANDANANDA

of caste or creed. Thus a few Mohammedan boys were also maintained at the Ashrama for several years, and trained so that they might develop faith in their own religion.

The training given at the Ashrama had enough scope for the culture of the heart as well. Through example as well as precept Swami Akhandananda encouraged his boys to do noble acts of service whenever there was any outbreak of pestilence or any other calamity in the neighbouring villages. Thus hundreds of cholera patients were nursed by them and saved from untimely death, while prophylactic measures were adopted in many villages with satisfactory results.

Even after the opening of the orphanage, Swami Akhandananda could not help taking succour to the distressed in distant places. During the heavy flood at Ghogha, in the Bhagalpur district of Bihar, he forthwith started a relief work in which fifty villages were helped for ten weeks, and himself nursed a large number of cholera patients on the occasion. Again, during the terrible earthquake in Bihar in 1934, he, old as he was, personally inspected the scenes of the ravage at Monghyr and Bhagalpur and gave impetus to the Mission's relief work in those areas. These are only a few of the hundreds of instances of his overflowing sympathy for the poor and helpless. His whole life was full of such disinterested acts. To him all human beings in distress were veritable divinities, and he found intense joy in serving them to the best of his might. In this he literally carried out Swami

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Vivekananda's behest: "The poor, the illiterate, the ignorant, the afflicted—let these be your God. Know that the service of these alone is the highest religion."

He loved to work silently and unobserved among the dumb masses and this is why, in spite of his indifferent health, he stuck to the village work at Sargachhi. He was made the Vice-President of the Ramakrishna Mission in 1925, and President in March, 1934, on the passing away of Swami Shivananda, the second President. The duties of the latter post required his presence at the Behur Math, but he preferred the solitude of Sargachhi, and was quite happy with his orphan boys, supervising the agricultural work and taking care of the valuable collection of trees and plants in the orchard. Routine work was distasteful to him. Throughout his life, however, he was a lover of books and gathered a great store of knowledge on diverse subjects. He had a prodigious memory, which, coupled with his strong power of observation and dramatic sense, made him a first-rate conversationalist. His adventurous life as a penniless itinerant monk throughout Northern and Western India, particularly his experiences in Tibet, furnished him with inexhaustible materials for conversation, and he would keep his audience spellbound with narrations of the privations and dangers he had gone through, and the rare experiences he had gained in exchange for them. He was an authority on Tibet, having visited that little-known country long before the late Rai Bahadur Sarat

Chandra Das, and he had had great opportunities of studying the people at close quarters on account of his knowledge of the language. He had a special aptitude for learning languages: while in Rajputana he mastered the intricacies of Hindi grammar in the course of only four days. He knew Sanskrit as well as English, and his particular interest was in the Vedas. Not only could he recite and explain choice passages from the Samhitas, but he was at one time keen about founding institutions in Bengal for the study and propagation of Vedic culture, for which purpose he visited scholars and persons of distinction. He was a forceful writer in his mother tongue and occasionally contributed serial articles to magazines, such as the unfinished "Three Years in Tibet," in the *Udbodhan*, the Bengali organ of the Ramakrishna Order, and his Reminiscences in the monthly *Vasumati*, left, alas, incomplete by his sudden passing away. Sometimes also he diverted himself by writing under a pseudonym in the daily *Vasumati*. He was an extempore speaker too, though he was extremely reluctant to appear before the public in that rôle. His impromptu speech at the memorial meeting in honour of the late Nafar Chandra Kundu, who gave his life to save two sweeper boys from a man-hole in Calcutta, was much appreciated.

Above all, like many a great saint, he loved fun. In fact, the boyish element was uppermost in him, so much so that even in the midst of a serious conversation he could make his audience laugh with some droll anecdote. His brother-

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

disciples, knowing this lighter side of his nature, would tickle him by creating humorous situations, which he too relished. One such incident has been narrated in the chapter on the life of Swami Brahmananda, who was a past-master in this game.

The love which the children of Sri Ramakrishna bore towards one another was ethereal. It is indescribable. Swami Akhandananda, being almost the youngest of the batch, was the favourite of all. Swami Vivekananda loved him particularly, and affectionately addressed him as "Ganges" (the English equivalent for "Ganga"); but he did not on that account spare the young Swami when it came to indulging in practical jokes. The Master himself was a great lover of fun and used it as an effective means of imparting spirituality and all his disciples shared this attitude towards life. Even if the joke was at one another's expense, it endeared them all the more to one another.

After his assumption of the Presidential office, Swami Akhandananda was called upon to initiate disciples. Though he showed reluctance at first, perhaps out of humility, he soon overcame the scruple, and during the last three years blessed a good many earnest seekers of both sexes. He insisted on their observing a high standard of purity and moral excellence in their everyday life.

About a year before his death he had a premonition of the approaching end, and told some of his disciples about it. With this in view he arranged the recital of the Ramayana and the

Mahabharata in his presence. Near the end he expressed his desire to celebrate the Vasanti Puja, the vernal worship of the Divine Mother Durga, at the Ashrama. But knowing that both his predecessors had had that desire and passed away without seeing the ceremony performed, he had misgivings about his own case too and expressed himself to that effect. He had a shed erected for this purpose and said to the Ashrama workers: "If I do not live to see the worship, at least I have the satisfaction of raising this Mandapa for the Mother. You will do the rest." Like the independent man that he was, he often pooh-poohed the idea of suffering long on his death-bed. Chafing under the infirmities of old age and at having to accept through sheer necessity the loving services of his attendants, he would occasionally declare that he sometimes had a mind to break away from these ties and wander alone, away from the haunts of men. He loved Sargachhi dearly and never liked to be away from it for long if he could help. But it was a cherished desire of his to give up the body, not there but at the Belur Math, the place that was sanctified with a thousand and one memories of his beloved brother-disciples from the great Swami Vivekananda downwards. This wish of his was providentially fulfilled, since he was taken to Calcutta for better medical treatment.

A month before his passing away, Swami Akhandananda wrote to the Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, asking for the wording of a Sanskrit couplet that had appeared in the April number of

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

the *Prabuddha Bharata* in 1927, in an article entitled "Neo-Hinduism." It ran as follows:

न त्वहं कामये राज्यं न स्वर्गं नाऽपुनर्भवम् ।

कामये दुःखतप्तार्ता प्राणिनामार्तिनाशनम् ॥

"I do not covet earthly kingdom, or heaven, or even salvation. The only thing I desire is the removal of the miseries of the afflicted." The idea expressed in the couplet was so much after the Swami's heart that even after the lapse of ten years, on the eve of his departure from this world he wanted to know its precise reading. Could there be a more touching evidence of his burning love and sympathy for the suffering and the miserable? Swami Akhandananda passed away at the age of 71, at the Belur Math on February 7, 1937.



Swami Subodhananda (P. 276)



Swami Vinanananda

XIV

SWAMI VIJNANANANDA

Swami Vijnanananda, before he took orders, was known by the name of Hariprasanna Chattopadhyaya. He was born on October 28, 1868, in a respectable family of Belgharia, which is within a couple of miles of Dakshineswar, the place immortalised by Sri Ramakrishna's superhuman devotional practices and the scene of his wonderful spiritual ministration to thousands of thirsty souls. It was in the year 1883 that Hariprasanna, then a student of St. Xavier's College, Calcutta, first had the privilege of meeting Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar. The Master's fame as a religious teacher *par excellence* had already spread far and wide, thanks to the publicity given to it by Keshab Chandra Sen, the great Brahmo leader. One of Sri Ramakrishna's favourite disciples, Sarat—afterwards known as Swami Saradananda—happened to be a college mate of Hariprasanna, and it was in his company that he met Sri Ramakrishna. He retained vivid recollections of that first visit, and the profound impression he received on that memorable occasion subsequently culminated in his renouncing home and worldly connections. The Master, as was his wont, showed great love and kindness towards the new-comer, which bound him indissolubly to him. Young though Hariprasanna

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

was, it did not take him much time to find out that here was a man who was extraordinary in every sense of the word, and he was as much captivated by his words of wisdom as he was drawn by his charming naivety. He saw the Master only a few more times in his life as he was compelled by force of circumstances to live at Bankipore, Bihar, but the influence of these few visits was enough to change the whole course of his life.

At that time Sri Ramakrishna was being taken to be a mad man by a section of people. Hariprasanna's family members belonged to that class. One afternoon Hariprasanna went to Dakshineswar, and on request from the Master stayed there for the night. Sri Ramakrishna himself took almost nothing at night, but special arrangement was made for the meal of the boy. Then very affectionately, the Master himself hung a mosquito-curtain and spread a mat for young Hariprasanna to sleep on in his own room—a privilege which was reserved for only the chosen few. When Hariprasanna was lying on his bed the Master came near and began to talk to him. Very tenderly he said: "Do you know why I love you all so much? You are my own people. The Divine Mother has shown me this." The conversation lasted for some time during the course of which the boy began to feel sleepy. After a while Hariprasanna found the Master going round and round his bed clapping his hands and muttering something indistinct. He began to wonder whether Sri Ramakrishna was

really a mad man as some supposed him to be. Afterwards he used to say that on that night Sri Ramakrishna gave him all that was to be given to him.

An interesting experience was waiting for him at home when he returned there next morning. The mother of Hariprasanna had passed the night in anxiety as there had been no information about him, and consequently she rebuked him severely on his return. In an angry tone she said, "You passed the night at the place of that mad Brahmin, I suppose?" Silence was the only answer that the young boy with guilty conscience could give to his mother on such an occasion. Then his younger sister also joined in and said, "That mad man has deranged the brain of no less than three hundred young men, I hear." Hariprasanna quietly remonstrated, "Why should he be a mad man?" "Ah, dear brother, he has deranged your brain also, I see," exclaimed the young sister though very naively. With reference to this incident, Swami Vijnananda used to say afterwards, "Had I not been caught in the influence of that mad man, who knows where I should have been now—wallowing in the welter of the world?"

Sri Ramakrishna's love for his young disciples or would-be apostles was immense. If any of them did not go to Dakshineswar for a considerable time, the Master would send for him or inquire about him through a messenger. At one time Hariprasanna did not visit Dakshineswar for a rather long time and the Master sent word

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

to him through Sarat to come and see him. When Hariprasanna arrived at Dakshineswar and met Sri Ramakrishna, the latter, in an aggrieved tone, asked: "Why is it that you don't care to come here? It is difficult to get you here even after sending a messenger for that!" The young disciple very frankly said, "I do not always get the mood to come, so I don't." At this the Master simply smiled and said, "You practise a little meditation, I believe?" "I do try to meditate, but how to have good meditation? I don't have any real meditation at all," replied Hariprasanna. The answer astonished the Master, who remained quiet for a while. Hariprasanna was looking at his face eagerly awaiting the words that would drop from his lips. As he was doing this, the face of Sri Ramakrishna changed, he looked grave and said, "All right, just go to the Panchavati now and try to meditate." Then he beckoned him to come nearer and wrote something on his tongue with his finger and sent him to the Panchavati: Hariprasanna wended his way towards the Panchavati, but after the Master had touched him he was in a state of intoxication and could hardly walk. When he sat for meditation at the Panchavati he remained for a long time oblivious of his surroundings and of the outside world. When Hariprasanna returned to his senses, he found the Master seated by his side smiling and gently passing his hands over his body. After a while the Master broke the silence and asked, "What? Did you have meditation to-day?" "Yes, to-day I had the experience of a good

SWAMI VIJNANANANDA

meditation," said Hariprasanna in astonishment. "Henceforward you will find that you will have good meditation every day," further said the Master. Sri Ramakrishna then went to his room accompanied by Hariprasanna and very affectionately gave many instructions about the intricacies of spiritual life. Swami Vijnanananda would say afterwards: "I was amazed to see his love for us that day. Repeatedly did it come to my mind, indeed how much does he think for us! I had no idea of that. There can be no comparison with his love." It was on that day that the Master told him: "Beware of the wiles of sex-attraction. Be very very careful on that point. You boys are the chosen people of the Divine Mother. She will get many things done through you. So I say to you, 'Be very very careful.'"

Swami Vijnanananda throughout his life obeyed this instruction to the letter and to the spirit.

How very free and intimate was Sri Ramakrishna with his disciples is revealed from the following interesting incident, narrated by Swami Vijnanananda himself once when he went to visit Dakshineswar in his old age:

"I used to wrestle with the Master out there on the verandah (pointing out of west door of the room of Sri Ramakrishna, overlooking the Ganges). He was such a little man and I was big and strong, so I could put him down easily. His body was so delicate, so soft, just like a baby. But we would wrestle and I would always put him down."

One of his class-friends says that as a student

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Hariprasanna was very spirited and would be upset at the sight of any moral turpitude or social injustice. After passing the First Arts Examination from Calcutta he went to Bankipore, Bihar. He graduated from the Patna College and then went to study Civil Engineering at Poona, where he was when Sri Ramakrishna left his mortal body. He said that he had a vision of the Master at that time.

After taking his degree of L. C. E. he joined the Government service and rose in the course of a few years to the position of a District Engineer. By that time the monastery at Baranagore had been founded, and the monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna often became his guests at different places. The flame of renunciation, however, that had been kindled in him by the Master was burning within him, and he found it impossible to remain in the world any longer. Even as an officer Hariprasanna was taciturn, would mix with few people, and remained in his bungalow absorbed in his own thoughts. But his colleagues and assistants were surprised at his uncommon degree of integrity as well as his strictness in regard to the discharge of his duties. And those who came into close touch with him revered him almost as a god—such was the force of his character, pure, spotless, and at the same time humble and unassuming.

In the year 1896, shortly before Swami Vivekananda returned for the first time from his triumphant mission in the West, Hariprasanna joined the Brotherhood at Alambazar, where the

SWAMI VIJNANANANDA

monastery had meanwhile been shifted, and came afterwards to be known as Swami Vijnanananda. It is said that Hariprasanna was very devoted to his mother, and that it was only for her sake that he accepted a job. But when he had collected a sum of money sufficient to give to his mother for her future maintenance, he felt his conscience free and told her his long cherished intention of renouncing the world. The affectionate mother saw the intensity of the longing of her son for the noble ideal and gave him permission to follow the walk of life he was hankering after.

Swami Vijnanananda accompanied Swami Vivekananda on his trip to Rajputana and elsewhere. Just before the monastery was removed to its permanent home at Belur in 1899, the task of constructing the necessary buildings was entrusted to Swami Vijnanananda, who later also supervised the construction of the embankment on the Ganges in front of the main building. Swami Vivekananda, who was then living at the Belur Math, one day saw him at work in the hot sun, and, as a favour, but mostly in fun, sent him, through a disciple, the little remnant of a glass of cold drink. Swami Vijnanananda took the glass and, although he noticed the minute quantity of the sherbet sent, he quaffed it just the same. To his wonder, he found that those few drops had completely allayed his thirst! When he next met Swamiji, the latter asked him how he had enjoyed the drink. He replied that though there had been very little left, yet it had the effect of quenching his thirst. Thereupon both laughed.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

This is but a solitary instance of the pleasant things which took place to sweeten the relationship among the brother-disciples.

Another humorous incident illustrative of their cordiality deserves mention. While the construction work was going on at the Belur Math, some materials were being eagerly expected. One evening Swami Brahmananda said that the materials would arrive by boat before the next morning, which Swami Vijnanananda doubted. Thereupon a wager was laid and both retired for the night. In the early hours of the morning Swami Vijnanananda got up to see whether the boat had come. It had not; so he returned to his bed elated at the prospect of winning the wager. A little later, the other Swami also came out, found the boat moored and quietly retired again. After day-break Swami Vijnanananda, without suspecting anything, came to him and joyously demanded the wager. "What for?" said the other. Then the disconcerting truth dawned upon Swami Vijnanananda, and finding the tables turned on him, he said, "Well, I have no money, you pay it for me!" General laughter followed. On another occasion a similar result greeted his prediction about rain. Afterwards the Swami would narrate those incidents by way of tribute to his illustrious brother-monk.

Swami Vivekananda, as is well known, was a man of varying moods. Sometimes he was playful, then everybody could approach him with freedom. But at other times he became very grave, when none dared to ask him questions.

SWAMI VIJNANANANDA

One day he was having a talk with Swami Vijnanananda, when the latter, encouraged by his light mood, not only had the boldness to differ from him, but even went so far as to say: "What do you know? You know nothing!" Swami Vivekananda's countenance changed. He became very grave, and after a few moments he called out to Swami Brahmananda, "Look here, Rakhal, he tells me that I know nothing!" Swami Brahmananda made light of the incident, remarking: "Why do you listen to him? He knows nothing!" Meanwhile Swami Vijnanananda, who had seen his mistake, apologised, and everything was all right. On another occasion Swami Vivekananda, at the end of a spell of deep thought, suddenly put this question to Swami Vijnanananda: "Suppose there is an elephant, and a worm has got into its trunk; it is slowly working its way up, and growing at the expense of the animal. What will be the ultimate result?" Swami Vijnanananda could not make out exactly what was in Swamiji's mind, and said he did not know. Swamiji, too, did not answer it himself. Swami Vijnanananda had not the courage to press for a solution of the problem at the moment, nor did he happen to raise it afterwards. Questioned later as to what he thought of it, he replied that it might have had a reference to the condition of India. By way of a solution he laconically said that if the elephant could not eject it, it was anyway sure to outlive it by overwhelming odds.

Swami Vivekananda had a great desire to raise

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

a big memorial temple to the Master at the Belur Math and entrusted the task of planning it to Swami Vijnanananda, giving him specific instructions for it. The Swami, in consultation with a noted European architect of Calcutta, prepared a design of the proposed temple, which had the approval of Swami Vivekananda. Swamiji's premature passing away in 1902 nipped the project in the bud. But the serious thoughts of spiritual giants never die out; they only bide their time. Thirty years after Swami Vivekananda's exit from this world, a magnificent offer of help came from some devoted American students of his thought, which has made it possible for the authorities of the Belur Math to erect the beautiful temple of Sri Ramakrishna after the design left by Swamiji. The foundation-stone of this noble edifice was set in its proper place in July, 1935, by Swami Vijnanananda as Vice-President of the Order. More of this later.

Swami Vijnanananda, visiting many places as a wandering monk, came to Allahabad in the year 1900. He became the guest of a doctor friend and wanted to pass a short time in that sacred place of pilgrimage. At that time there was in Allahabad a group of young men who met together in a rented house which they called Brahnavadin Club, and they made attempts to improve themselves morally and spiritually through scriptural study, discussion and worship. This group of boys was organised by a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna who had gone to Allahabad some years back and who left for Calcutta in the

SWAMI VIJNANANANDA

year 1900. Then the boys had to manage their own affairs without any superior guidance. When they heard that a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna had come to the city, they thought it a stroke of good fortune and at once went to the Swami to request him to come to their place and to stay there for some time to guide and supply them with help and inspiration. The keen earnestness and sincere devotion of the boys persuaded the Swami to visit their place, and after seeing everything he felt inclined to put up there for a period. This was the beginning of a great thing. For in this place the Swami passed ten precious years of his life in hard Tapasya, study and meditation till he afterwards established a permanent centre of the Ramakrishna Mission in the city where he spent the rest of his life as a unique spiritual force. At the Brahmavadin Club, the Swami had to pass through much hardship—being his own cook and servant, depending for subsistence on what chance might bring. But he hardly felt the suffering, for his mind and thought were centred on a plane where these things could not reach. Most of the time he would spend in meditation and study, seeking no company but not refusing any help to persons who sought it. Thus, through the silent influence of his example as well as through personal contact, he changed the course of many lives. It was only in the evening that outsiders were generally allowed to see him. For them he would sometimes hold scriptural classes or would otherwise solve their problems through informal talks. The Swami was always loth to

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

talk much. Specially with regard to spiritual matters he would dismiss the whole problem with as few words as possible—sometimes in fun and sometimes in a serious mood. But he had a wonderful capacity to satisfy the inquirers even with his short conversation. To persons who would come with any big philosophical problem, he would say, “Just follow the maxims which you have read in the copy books—namely, ‘Always speak the truth,’ ‘To take a thing without the consent of its owner is to steal,’ ” and so on. It would be very difficult to draw him out specially on spiritual things, but when he was in a mood to talk he would at once change the atmosphere and supply spiritual food to the listeners which would give them sustenance for many years to come, if not for their whole lives.

From the Brahnavadin Club the Swami removed himself to the Ramakrishna Math, Muthi-gunj, which he founded in the year 1908. Here he also lived the same austere life as in the Club, only his sphere of activity was now wider. In the course of time a dispensary was opened as a part of the activities of the Ashrama. But these activities touched but the outer fringe of his life which always flowed inwardly beyond the possibility of the knowledge of ordinary people. With reference to him, Swami Brahmananda who had great spiritual insight would say: “It is very difficult to know him. He always keeps himself hidden. But he is a knower of Brahman. He has known the Self and is thus satisfied.” He was eager to send those boys who had special spiritual

aptitude to Allahabad to grow under the inspiration of Swami Vijnanananda.

Swami Vijnanananda was also a great scholar. He was ■ voracious reader and had varied intellectual interests. He was a great friend of Srijiit Srish Chandra Basu and Major B. D. Basu, two noted scholars of Allahabad at that time. At their instance, he also undertook some literary work. Besides writing two works in Bengali entitled *A Manual of Engineering and Waterworks*, he translated from Sanskrit into English the voluminous Purana, *Devi-Bhagavata*, two ancient astrological and astronomical works, Varahamihira's *Brihajjataka* and *Surya Siddhanta*, the latter into Bengali as well as English. Towards his last days he was engaged in translating the Ramayana into English, which he left unfinished.

Swami Vijnanananda loved retirement. He was, therefore, not actively engaged in the main work of the Ramakrishna Mission. But whenever his help was necessary he would ungrudgingly give it. His engineering knowledge was particularly useful in this respect. He supervised the construction of some buildings of the Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service, Benares, as also of the Swami Vivekananda Temple at the Belur Math. Besides he helped with valuable advice in regard to the construction of other buildings.

On account of his humility and love of retirement he refused for years on end to be a trustee of the Ramakrishna Math. But when in 1934 after the passing away of Swami Shivananda, the

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

second President of the Ramakrishna Order, the necessity arose for his becoming a trustee, he could not decline it any longer. He became Vice-President of the Order that very year, and on the demise of Swami Akhandananda, the third President, he became the President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission in March, 1937. Feeling in his heart of hearts the urge to initiate people—wearied pilgrims in the wilderness of life—he broke, towards the end of his life, his lifelong practice of not initiating anybody although he was pre-eminently qualified to be a Guru. This sense of duty marked him throughout. Through his grace hundreds of men and women found the spiritual path. To each of them he gave instructions in brief, so that they might in their lives practise the truths he taught. During the last few years of his life he travelled extensively and visited many centres of the Ramakrishna Order including Colombo and Rangoon. Everywhere his presence was the occasion of spiritual awakening to innumerable persons.

The Swami did not give lectures or formal talks. But in the informal conversations and homely talks he would have with devotees and inquirers his words would emit fire. Although he would not usually talk seriously with those who would approach him with big philosophical problems and the like for the sake of mere discussion, when sincere inquirers would approach him with the pressing problems of their inner life, his face would light up and with great affection, love and sympathy he would talk, and the problems which

to the persons concerned appeared knotty would dissolve immediately, and they would go away with their heavy burden removed. Living, as he always was, on the spiritual plane, to make supreme efforts for the realisation of Truth was the burden of his advice given to the devotees. "God-vision is the true aim of human life, for that alone can give us real and lasting satisfaction. Man hankers after the things of the world, wealth, sense enjoyments, honour, etc., in the hope that these can give him happiness in life. But it is the experience of all that the pursuit of these has only a reverse effect on the mind. Not only do we fail to realise the desired end through that, but the restlessness of the mind is even increased, and we are rendered more unhappy than in the beginning. Through wealth and honour our egotism is bloated up, and there is no greater obstacle in the spiritual path than egotism.... The supreme duty of man is to remember Him always, whether one is engaged in consciously repeating His name or not. Every breath of ours should be associated with Him, in our mind. We should consider that we breathe in God to make the inside pure, and we breathe out God to make the outside pure," he said to a group of devotees who met him in Madras.

"But how can we have peace seeing that there is so much conflict and suffering in the country due to trade depression and political struggles?" asked one of them.

"Why do you make so much of these struggles that are going on in the outside world?" replied

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

the Swami. "Do you think that they will stop, supposing you gain your immediate end and the present phase of the struggle passes away? Certainly they will not. Restlessness arises not from these external struggles, but from our own internal hankering and our clinging to the things of the world. Even if God were to appear before us to bring peace unto our souls we would refuse to recognise Him. For when He comes, He takes away our worldly possessions, and few of us are ready to make this sacrifice."

Sometimes precious little gems were hidden in the words he would utter in fun. For instance, he would at times ask, in Hindi, "*Darshan sâf hai?*"—meaning, Is your vision clear? It is said that amongst a section of monks in North India there is a practice that when one meets another he makes this inquiry regarding the latter's spiritual progress. So the Swami now and then would ask people half in affection, half in fun,—“Is your vision clear?”

Yes, how many of us can say that our vision is clear? All trouble in the world arises from the fact that our vision is not clear. Where one should see Divinity, one sees wickedness and iniquity; where one should see love, one sees hatred and tyranny. The only solution of all the ills of life is to make one's vision pure and sanctified, then only will the problems of the world be solved as surely as snow melts away before the sun.

Absorbed as he always was in his own thought, there was an atmosphere of aloofness about him.

He would always prefer to be left to himself. In later days, when streams of devotees would meet him, he would abruptly say, "I would like to be quiet." In this matter he was no respecter of persons. He had lost all distinction between the high and the low, the rich and the poor. He lived on a plane where such distinction does not exist. He could not submit himself to any social code of conduct. To one who did not know him well, his manner, his dress, his mode of life, might seem a bit out of the way, but to those who knew him closely these things made him all the more lovable, for there was an air of childlikeness in them. At times he would be full of wit, humour and mirth and throw the audience into roaring laughter. In many things he was just like an innocent child. His frankness was beyond comparison. The same trait made him a very plain-speaking person, but his straight words would not give offence to any man.

Though he had a very retiring disposition, he was not insensitive to the misery and suffering around. At Orissa some poor people who took initiation from him brought some presents to the Guru. That upset him immensely, and he declared he would not give initiation if such people brought any offerings. His renunciation was very great and spontaneous. There was a delightful naturalness about it. A rich disciple once gave him a purse as a humble offering. "You have no place to keep that, I suppose? And so you are thrusting the responsibility of keeping the money on me!" said the Swami

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

jocosely but unawares giving out his attitude towards wordly things.

He had many spiritual visions and experiences about which he was discreetly silent. Only now and then in unguarded moments would he give out some secret. Once in the course of conversation he said that he felt the all-pervasive presence of God. At Pegu in Burma he saw an image of Buddha in a pagoda. "It is not like the one I saw," he said in astonishment. "What other image do you mean, Maharaj?" asked the attendant. Then the Swami described how in one of his visits to the sacred spot of Sarnath he had a vision that everything was dissolved in a sea of pure consciousness and out of that appeared ■ form of Buddha—so sweet and so affectionate! Suddenly the Swami awoke to the consciousness that he was giving out things which he should not. Then he began to make fun about what he had said, in order to neutralise his statements. To him the evidence of the existence of the Master, though not in the physical body, was as strong and as natural as that of the things that are seen in broad daylight. That faith kept him calm and joyous under all circumstances. In illness he would not take any medicine, nor would he allow attendance on him beyond the least that was necessary. During the last years of his life he suffered from many ailments. People were hardly aware of them all. Once a rich devotee prayed to him that she might call in the best doctors of Calcutta to see him. The Swami replied, "I am under the treatment of a doctor better than the

SWAMI VIJNANANANDA

best physician you can think of." This precious information was a great relief to her: she thought that then some physician was attending him. "What is the name of that doctor?" asked the devotee in eager expectation for an answer. "The Lord Himself is my doctor," said the Swami. This simple and unsophisticated answer silenced all controversy as to the necessity of calling in a doctor.

From the time when the construction of the Sri Ramakrishna Temple at Belur began, he was anxiously watching its completion in order that he might install his great Master there as early as possible. In view of his failing health, it was decided to have the installation ceremony done just after the completion of the main shrine. On January 14, 1938, Swami Vijnanananda performed the dedication of the temple and the consecration of the marble image of Sri Ramakrishna amidst imposing rites—a function which was witnessed by about fifty thousand devotees and spectators. Having done this he felt that the great task of his life was finished, and he got ready to join his beloved Master. He paid only one more visit to Belur, and that was only on the occasion of the Master's birthday. He looked very much emaciated, and those who saw him then were apprehensive of the approaching end. In spite of this, however, he initiated hundreds of aspirants, lay and monastic, and answered their queries.

The Swami returned to Allahabad, and entered Mahasamadhi on April 25, 1938. The body which

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

he gave up like a rejected garment, but which was the vehicle of supreme spiritual achievement and great spiritual ministration, was consigned with appropriate ceremonies to the sacred water of the Triveni, at the confluence of the Ganges and the Jumna, in the presence of a large number of monks and devotees.



Swami Abhedananda



Swami Akhandananda (P. 313)

XV

SWAMI ABHEDANANDA

Swami Abhedananda was one of those rare souls who gathered round the magnetic personality of Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar and afterwards became instrumental in the fulfilment of his divine mission. The name by which the Swami was known before his taking orders was Kaliprasad Chandra. He was born on October 2, 1866, in an enlightened family at Aheeritola in Calcutta. His mother Nayantara Devi was intensely devoted to the Goddess Kali to whom she offered her whole-souled prayer for the birth of a gifted son. It was in response, as it were, to her ardent prayer that the child was born, and she named him "Kaliprasad" to betoken the grace of the Divine Mother. Kaliprasad's father, Rasiklal Chandra, was a senior teacher of English in the Oriental Seminary of Calcutta. He was no less pious than his devoted wife. No wonder that a child, who in after years shone as a bright luminary in the spiritual firmament of India, should be born of such a worthy couple. His school life began at the age of five, and he excelled all his school mates in study, games, paintings and similar other pursuits. He often listened with rapt attention to the inspiring stories of the great Indian epics from the lips of his dear parents who, knowing the mental make-up of the boy,

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

always tried to kindle in him an aspiration to emulate the lives of the great spiritual heroes of the land.

From his very boyhood he was inclined to Sanskrit studies. At the age of eighteen he creditably passed the Entrance Examination from the Calcutta Oriental Seminary, in which, as already mentioned, his father was a teacher of English. Gifted with a genius for philosophic contemplation the boy soon began to interest himself in solving the various intricate problems of life. His desire to become a philosopher was greatly stimulated when he read for the first time in Wilson's *History of India* that Shankaracharya was the propounder of the Advaita system of philosophy. This opened a new chapter in his life. His perusal of the Gita served only to intensify all the more his yearning to follow in the footsteps of the great Acharyas and to study their philosophies. But along with this ever-increasing thirst for acquiring spiritual wisdom, he felt as well a strong urge to widen the bounds of his intellectual knowledge by studying the masterpieces of great savants of the East and the West. Even at this tender age he finished reading not only such abstruse books as John Stuart Mill's *Logic*, *Three Essays on Religion*, Herschel's *Astronomy*, Ganot's *Physics*, Lewis's *History of Philosophy* and Hamilton's *Philosophy* but also the great works of Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Banbhata and other eminent poets of our land—a fact which gives ample evidence of his prodigious intellect and extraordinary genius.

But his intellectual allegiance was not confined to any particular school of thought. He developed even at this early age a remarkable sympathy for all faiths. That is why we find him so intently listening to the illuminating lectures delivered by the distinguished leaders and exponents of Christianity, Brahmoism and Hinduism. In 1883 he attended a series of public lectures delivered by the noted Hindu philosopher, Pandit Sasadhar Tarkachudamani, on the six systems of Hindu philosophy. He was deeply impressed when he heard his pregnant discourse on the Yoga system of Patanjali and learnt about the infinite possibilities of the human soul. Thenceforth he made a special study of some of the most authoritative books on the subject and felt a strong desire to practise Yoga. But he was told by his friends not to follow any of the methods described in the *Yoga-Sutras* without the proper guidance of a competent preceptor. The boy now began to search for a suitable teacher who would make him a real Yogi and teach him how to attain to the Nirvikalpa Samadhi, the crowning glory of man's spiritual experiences. One of his classmates with whom he discussed the matter told him of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and directed him to go to the great saint who lived at that time in the temple-garden of Dakshineswar, five miles to the north of Calcutta.

Kaliprasad grew restless to see the Master. But for some reason or other, he could not get a suitable opportunity to go to Dakshineswar for a long time. One day, however, he started at noon for

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

the temple-garden in the grilling heat of the sun. But great was his disappointment when he came to learn after reaching the place that Sri Ramakrishna had gone to Calcutta and would not return till after nightfall. Sorely perplexed he sat down with a heavy heart under a tree. After a while a young man, Sasi by name (who afterwards became known as Swami Ramakrishnananda), appeared there and asked him in loving accents the reason for his coming to Dakshineswar. Kaliprasad opened his heart to him. Sasi, coming to know that Kaliprasad had not taken anything at noon, at once made arrangement for his dinner and midday siesta. Kaliprasad passed the whole afternoon in a breathless thrill of expectancy. The day rolled on into night but still the Master did not come ! The joy of the boy, however, knew no bounds when at about nine o'clock Sri Ramakrishna came back to Dakshineswar. The boy silently entered the Master's room and made obeisance to him. Without any hesitation he expressed his desire to learn Yoga from him so that he might attain to the highest state of Samadhi. At the very first sight the Master fathomed the depth of the boy's soul, and was delighted to notice the vast spiritual possibilities latent in him. He instinctively felt that Kaliprasad belonged to the inner circle of his young devotees. Sri Ramakrishna was overjoyed to hear the words of the boy and said: "You were a great Yogi in your previous birth. This is your last birth. I shall initiate you into the mysteries of Yoga practices." So saying he

endearingly drew him to his side, wrote a Mantra on his tongue and placed his right hand on the chest of the boy. The mystic touch of the Master brought about a wonderful revolution in his mind, and he immediately became buried in deep meditation. After that Kaliprasad began to practise religious discipline in right earnest under the loving guidance of Sri Ramakrishna, and through his grace was blessed with many spiritual experiences.

He now began to avail himself of every opportunity to run away from the stifling atmosphere of his home and to sit at the feet of the Master in the calm and elevating environs of the temple-garden of Dakshineswar. His thirsty soul drank deep at the perennial fount of heavenly wisdom which issued from the lips of the Master for the spiritual comfort of eager aspirants. As time rolled on, Kaliprasad found in him the embodiment of the Absolute Truth inculcated by the highest philosophy as well as of the universal religion which underlies all sectarian religions of the world. From Sri Ramakrishna he eventually realised that the three orders of metaphysical thought—dualism, qualified monism and monism—are but stages on the way to the Supreme Truth. They are not contradictory but complementary to one another. Thus the validity of all stages that are harmoniously knitted in a graded series of spiritual experiences culminating in the realisation of the Formless Absolute—the One without a second—was made clear to him by the Super-mystic of Dakshineswar. Kali soon became

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

intimately acquainted with Narendra Nath, the chief disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, and often held learned discussions with him on various abstruse points of philosophy both Eastern and Western. During the illness of the Master at Shyampukur and Cossipore in 1885-86, Kali along with others devoted himself heart and soul to the service of Sri Ramakrishna and, after his passing, renounced the world and became a Sannyasin with the monastic name of Swami Abhedananda. At the Baranagore monastery where one by one the young disciples of the Master gathered together and banded themselves into a holy fraternity of monks under the leadership of Narendra Nath, Kali used very often to shut himself up in his own room for intense spiritual practices as also for a systematic study of Vedanta and Western philosophy. This rigorous course of spiritual discipline and his deep devotion to the study of Vedanta excited the admiration of all and earned for him the significant epithets of "Kali Tapasvi" (the ascetic Kali) and "Kali Vedanti." During this time he composed beautiful verses on Sri Ramakrishna and the Holy Mother. The latter was deeply impressed when she heard the excellent verse composed about her own self, and she blessed him heartily, saying, "May the Goddess of Learning ever dwell in your throat." Indeed this blessing of the Holy Mother came to be fulfilled both in letter and spirit.

But very soon the "call of the forest"—a tendency to embrace a wandering life according to the orthodox traditions of monastic life—was

most irresistibly felt by Swami Abhedananda. And he travelled barefooted from place to place, depending entirely on whatever chance would bring to him. He endured all sorts of privation and hardship and practised austerities of all kinds. He walked up to the sources of the Ganges and the Jumna, spent most of the time in contemplation of the Absolute, visited sacred places like Kedarnath and Badrinarayan, Hardwar and Puri, Dwarka and Rameswaram, and met in the course of his extensive travels some of the greatest saints and scholars of the time in various centres of religious culture. While at Rishikesh he made a special study of Vedanta under a celebrated monk named Swami Dhanaraj Giri who was noted for his profundity of scholarship and was well versed in the six systems of Hindu philosophy. Needless to say, this rich and varied experience of his itinerant life made him eminently fit to deliver to humanity at large in after years the lofty and universal message of his Master.

Up to this time the ideal of these young monks had been to strive for their personal liberation and realisation of the Supreme Atman by severe penance and meditation, remaining as much as possible aloof from the world in consonance with the prevailing Hindu idea, sanctified by tradition and sanctioned by the sages and seers from hoary antiquity. But Swami Vivekananda, who was in America, brought home to the minds of his Gurubhais, through his inspiring epistles, the fact that the mission of his life was to create a new order

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

of monks in India who would dedicate their lives to serve others and scatter broadcast over the *entire world* the life-giving ideas of the Master. The idea of personal liberation, he pointed out, was unworthy of those who believed themselves to be the favoured disciples of a Prophet. Because of his profound faith in the leader, Swami Abhedananda together with other brother-disciples accepted his creed, knowing the voice of Swami Vivekananda to be the voice of the Master. Thus a new orientation of outlook on the monastic life came upon him. And in response to an invitation from Swami Vivekananda, who was then preaching Vedanta in London, he went there on behalf of the Ramakrishna Math in the latter part of 1896, to serve the cause of the Master. Swami Vivekananda had already announced that a learned brother-disciple of his, who had just arrived from India, would deliver a lecture on Advaita Vedanta at the next meeting to be held in the Christo-Theosophical Society of London. Swami Abhedananda was taken by surprise as he had not been previously consulted in the matter! His name was found flashed in handbills and newspapers even without his knowledge! When the matter was brought to his notice, he was sorely perplexed and became extremely nervous inasmuch as he had not before this stood on any public platform to deliver a speech either in English, Bengali or Sanskrit. It was indeed a fiery ordeal for him. He strongly remonstrated with Swami Vivekananda for this step which he thought unwise, but all his arguments were of no

SWAMI ABHEDANANDA

avail. Swami Vivekananda heartened him with the inspiring words, "Depend on him who has ever given me strength and courage in all the trials of my life." These words comforted him, and relying entirely on the infinite grace of the Master he appeared at the meeting on the appointed day. The hall was packed to suffocation and all eyes were fixed upon the radiant countenance of the heroic soul who stood to discharge his responsibility at that crucial hour. The maiden speech which Swami Abhedananda delivered before the Society was a splendid success. At this the joy of Swami Vivekananda knew no bounds. Referring to this happy occasion Mr. Eric Hammond, an English disciple of Swami Vivekananda, writes: "The Master (Swami Vivekananda) was more than content to have effaced himself in order that his brother's opportunity should be altogether unhindered. The whole impression had in it a glowing beauty quite indescribable. It was as though the Master thought, 'Even if I perish on this plane, my message will be sounded through these dear lips and the world will hear it.'" Hearing this lecture, Captain Sevier, another English disciple of Swami Vivekananda, made the pertinent observation: "Swami Abhedananda is a born preacher. Wherever he will go he will have success." Swami Vivekananda was fully confident that even in his absence Swami Abhedananda would be the fittest person to carry on, with success, the work which had been started in London. So he entrusted him with the charge of conducting his classes on Vedanta and

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Raja Yoga and left for India in December, 1896. Swami Abhedananda continued his classes and delivered public lectures in churches and before religious and philosophical Societies in London and its suburbs for one year. During his stay in London he formed acquaintance with many distinguished savants including Prof. Max Müller and Prof. Paul Deussen. His eloquence, his lucid exposition of Vedanta philosophy and, above all, his depth of spiritual realisation made a profound impression on all who came in touch with him and listened to his illuminating lectures. It reflects much credit on his many-sided genius that even within this short period he succeeded in creating in the minds of the Western people a deep-seated regard for the richness and integrity of Indian thought and culture.

In 1897 a new chapter was opened in his eventful life. At the request of Swami Vivekananda, Swami Abhedananda crossed the Atlantic and landed in New York to take charge of the Vedanta Society which had already been started there. He was almost penniless at this time and had to work hard to push on the work that he had taken up in obedience to the command of his brother-disciple. By dint of perseverance, self-confidence and unflinching devotion to the Master he was soon able to create a field for himself and tide over the swarm of difficulties that surrounded him at the initial stage of his work. But his phenomenal success soon excited the jealousy of the Christian missionaries, who began to fabricate scandalous lies to bring the Swami into disrepute.

SWAMI ABHEDANANDA

Nothing daunted, Swami Abhedananda carried on his work with his usual vigour and sang-froid. He was soon acclaimed as a great exponent of Hindu thought and culture and invited to speak before various learned Societies. His profundity of scholarship, incisive intellectual powers, oratorical talents and his charming personality made him so popular that in New York itself in the Mott Memorial Hall he had to deliver ninety lectures to satisfy public demand. Even the greatest savants of America became greatly impressed by his intellectual brilliance. On one occasion in 1898 Prof. William James held a discussion with him in his house on the problem of the Unity of the Ultimate Reality. It lasted for nearly four hours, and Prof. Royce, Prof. Lanman, Prof. Shaler and Dr. James, the Chairman of the Cambridge Philosophical Conferences, took part. Prof. James was finally forced to admit that from the Swami's standpoint it was impossible to deny Ultimate Unity, but declared that he still could not believe it.

In most of his lectures he called upon his audience to cultivate purity of thought and a spirit of love for all, irrespective of caste, creed or nationality. "Whether we believe in God or not," said the Swami, "whether we have faith in prophets or not, if we have self-control, concentration, truthfulness and disinterested love for all, then we are on the way to spiritual perfection. On the contrary, if one believes in God or in a creed and does not possess these four, he is no more spiritual than an ordinary man of the world.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

In fact, his belief is only a verbal one." The Swami was never tired of making it distinctly clear to his Western audience that the religion or philosophy taught in Vedanta is not merely an intellectual assumption but is the result of a long and arduous search and inquiry into the ultimate principle of this universe. It is this Supreme Principle—the Unchangeable Substance—which has been expressed by human minds under various names such as God, Creator, Designer, First Cause, the Father, Jehovah, Allah or Brahman, in different systems of thought. "If we wish to know this Ultimate Truth," said the Swami, "we must go beyond the pale of nature and seek the explanation in the realm of the Absolute. Nature with her manifoldness deludes us and lands us in uncertainties. The scientists, even after a careful scrutiny of natural phenomena, have arrived at certain conclusions which are like conclusions in which nothing is concluded. The latest finding of science is that the ultimate goal of everything is unknown and unknowable. Here Vedanta comes to the rescue and advises its students to study not merely nature but our Self or Atman which is beyond nature, beyond name and form, beyond multiplicity. All confusion will be removed when the Absolute Truth as taught in Vedanta will be realised." The Swami's learned exposition of Vedanta in the light of modern scientific knowledge carried in it such an irresistible force of appeal that he was able to enlist such adherents as would not be convinced unless shown that Huxley, Tyndal or

SWAMI ABHEDANANDA

Spencer or Kant agreed in substance with a particular view advanced by Vedanta.

He travelled extensively all through the United States, Alaska and Mexico and delivered addresses on various phases of Vedanta philosophy in almost all the principal cities of America. He made frequent trips to Europe also, delivering lectures to appreciative audiences in different parts of the Continent and making contact with eminent scholars. He proved himself not only an able and efficient teacher but furthered the success of his work in every way by his remarkable organising ability, sound judgment and well-balanced opinion, and by his power of adaptability to Western methods of work and teaching. Contemplative by nature, even in the midst of his strenuous activities, he was able to maintain a poise and calm that added grace and beauty to his manifold works and acted with telling effect upon all who came in contact with his magnetic personality. His scholarship was the despair of many, and his intellectual brilliance, dignified bearing as also his nobility of character commanded loving homage from even the most aristocratic sections of the American people. Under his able control and management the work of organisation was fully accomplished. The seeds sown by Swami Vivekananda on the American soil went on ever growing vigorously as days passed, striking their roots deep into the heart of the nation. Except for a short visit to India in 1906, he thus spent almost a quarter of a century in this laudable work of spreading the

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

message of the Master in prominent centres of alien culture.

He was not only a powerful speaker, but also ■ prolific writer. If his spoken words moulded the lives of hundreds of persons, his printed thoughts influenced a wider circle of people in different countries. His writings contain deep philosophy with a great wealth of information couched in a very popular style. As such they have been of immense help in broadcasting the philosophical and spiritual ideas of India. As a matter of fact, they constitute a valuable legacy to the spiritually inclined souls all the world over.

Swami Abhedananda after consolidating his Vedanta work in America returned to India in 1921. On his way home he visited Japan, China, the Philippines, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Rangoon and spread the message of the Master in those places also. The Swami was now fifty-seven years old. Even at this advanced age his spirit of adventure was not diminished in the least. After reaching India he started on a long tour and went as far as Tibet. He visited Peshawar, Kabul, the Punjab and other important places of Northern India on his return journey and reached the Belur Math in 1923.

To carry on Vedanta work in India according to his own plan and method he soon established a centre under the name of Ramakrishna Vedanta Society in the heart of Calcutta. Attracted by his personality many distinguished men of the metropolis soon gathered round him and helped him in spreading the Master's message far and wide. A

SWAMI ABHEDANANDA

Bengali monthly under the name of "Vishwavanī" was soon published to facilitate his missionary activities. In fact, his soul knew no rest, and he spent the last drop of his energy for the spiritual benefit of those who came in touch with him. But this unusual strain on his nerves at this age began to tell seriously upon his health. His iron constitution broke down almost beyond cure under the pressure of work. But his weakness and ailments notwithstanding, the Swami did not lack his wonted fire and enthusiasm when he was called upon to preside over the Parliament of Religions held at the Town Hall, Calcutta, on the occasion of the Birth Centenary of Sri Ramakrishna in 1937. He rose equal to the occasion and he never forgot to emphasise in the course of his learned address the synthetic message of the Master. "The mission of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna," said the Swami, "was to show by his living example how a truly spiritual man, being dead to the world of senses, can live on the plane of God-consciousness For the first time it was demonstrated that all religions were like so many paths leading to the same goal, that the realisation of the same Almighty Being is the highest Ideal of Christianity, Mohammedanism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism as well as of all other religions of the world. Sri Ramakrishna's mission was to proclaim the eternal truth that God is one but has many aspects, and that the same one God is worshipped by different nations under various names and forms; that He is personal, impersonal and beyond both; that

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

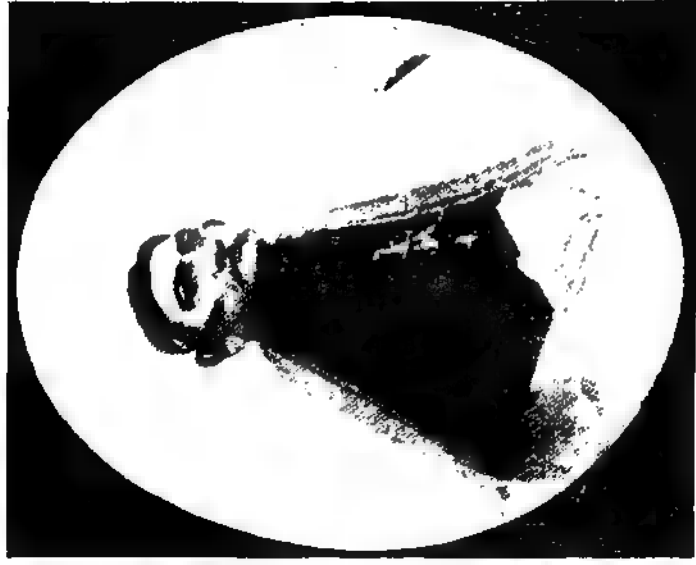
He is with name and form and yet nameless and formless." In conclusion the Swami observed, "I hope that this Parliament of Religions will sound the death-knell of all communal strife and struggle, and will create a great opportunity for promoting fellowship among various faiths." This was indeed his last public utterance and bears eloquent testimony to his deep-seated loyalty to the Master as also to the sterling stuff he was made of.

The Swami left the mortal frame on September 8, 1939, and passed into the realm of eternal bliss to enjoy a well-earned rest. The passing of such an outstanding personality from the arena of Indian life was mourned by a large number of people in India and abroad. He was one of the remarkable spiritual and cultural ambassadors of India to the outside world. His was indeed a life in which we find a happy blending of profound spirituality and a spirit of service—a life dedicated to the spiritual uplift of humanity. He came to the world in obedience to the Divine Will to fulfil the mission of the Master and after his task had been finished he went back to the Source of Light and Life from which he came.

LAY DISCIPLES



Nag Mahashay



Girish Chandra Ghosh (P. 390)

I

NAG MAHASHAY

Nag Mahashay—that was the name by which Durga Charan Nag was popularly known—was, according to Swami Vivekananda, “one of the greatest of the works of Ramakrishna Paramahansa.” He would say, “I have travelled far in different parts of the globe, but nowhere could I meet a great soul like Nag Mahashay.”

The life of Nag Mahashay reads like a fairy tale, like legendary stories. His humility, his hospitality, his kindness to all including lower animals, his asceticism and renunciation, above all his devotion to God and to his Guru, was so wonderful that if we hear the incidents we become awestruck and ask ourselves if they could be really true. Such stories can be found narrated in the Puranas—and the modern mind does not know whether they were facts or simply imaginary illustrations of moral precepts—but the happenings in the life of Nag Mahashay were witnessed by persons who are still alive and stand as a living testimony to their authenticity.

Nag Mahashay was born on August 21, 1846, in a small village called Deobhog, situated at a short distance from Narayangunge in the district of Dacca. His father's name was Dindayal Nag, who was an employee in the firm of Messrs. Rajkumar & Hari Charan Pal Chowdhury

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

of Kumartuli in Calcutta. Dindayal was an orthodox, devout Hindu, and commanded respect from all for his piety. Though his pay was very low, the proprietors of the firm looked upon him as a member of their family rather than as a servant. They had unshakable faith in his honesty, and it was justified by many wonderful incidents.

Nag Mahashay lost his mother while very young, and was brought up by his widowed aunt—Dindayal's sister—who was more like a mother to him and wielded a great influence over his future life.

From his childhood Nag Mahashay showed great sweetness of disposition, and his nice appearance attracted the notice of all. He was of philosophical temperament. In the evening the boy would be gazing listlessly at the starry sky, and say to his wondering aunt: "Let us go away to that region. I don't feel at home here." The sight of the moon would make him dance with joy, and in plants waving in the wind, he would find a friend and playmate.

He was fond of hearing Pauranic stories told by his aunt. Sometimes they would stir his imagination so much that he would see them exactly in dreams.

Nag Mahashay was noted for his great truthfulness even from his childhood. He would rarely take part in games; but if at all he would join them he would not tolerate any player telling a lie. In that case he would stop conversation with the culprit until the latter was repentant. The

boy Durga Charan was the constant arbiter in case of quarrels among his companions, such was their confidence in his judgment and sobriety. He was beloved of all—young and old.

With growing age Nag Mahashay developed a great thirst for knowledge. After finishing his primary education, Nag Mahashay was in a fix as to how to pursue his further study. To go to Calcutta to his father was not possible as the family income was very meagre. But study must be continued. So Nag Mahashay began to attend a school at Dacca, covering every day a distance of twenty miles on foot in sun and rain. It is said that Nag Mahashay absented himself from the school only for two days in the course of the fifteen months he was there. Though the strain of studying under such a condition was severe, Nag Mahashay's love for learning carried him through. Not a word of complaint could be heard from him, though his suffering at times would be of an alarming nature.

Within a short period of his school life at Dacca, Nag Mahashay mastered the Bengali language, and wrote also a book for children.

Nag Mahashay was now married through the insistence of his aunt, who was anxious to see the motherless boy soon settled in life.

Five months after the marriage Nag Mahashay came to Calcutta to live with his father and got himself admitted into the Campbell Medical School. But here also he could not study more than a year and a half. He then studied Homoeopathy under Doctor Bihari Lal Bhaduri, who was

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

greatly charmed with the amiable disposition of his student.

As Nag Mahashay lived mostly in Calcutta and his wife was at her father's house, he did not come much in contact with her. Even while he was at home, it is said, he would sometimes pass the night up a tree in order to avoid the company of his wife, so mortally afraid was he of falling into the snares of worldly life. His wife, however, died suddenly. This gave him a great shock, but from another standpoint he felt relief.

Even while studying Homoeopathy Nag Mahashay started medical practice impelled by a desire to remove the suffering of the poor patients of the locality. Soon his name as a successful doctor spread, and crowds of poor people would throng at his door every day. Nag Mahashay lost no opportunity to give succour to the poor. So great was his spirit of service and so large was his heart that unscrupulous people could easily take advantage of his goodness.

At this time Nag Mahashay came in contact with Suresh Chandra Datta, afterwards a great devotee of Sri Ramakrishna. From the first meeting they became intimate friends. Suresh was Brahmo by temperament and did not believe in Hindû deities. Though their religious views were as poles asunder, still, strange to say, they loved each other dearly. Suresh was struck with the spotless character of his friend.

Gradually Nag Mahashay began to lose interest in medicine, and his attention was devoted to the study of scriptures and the practice of religion.

He would daily take bath in the Ganges and find delight in discussing religious problems with Pandits. Often he would go to the cremation ground near by, and remain there till dead of night brooding over the unreality of the world. His invariable conclusion would be—God only is real, everything else is vanity of vanities. Life is in vain, if God is not realised.

Sometimes he would pass long hours in meditation in the cremation ground. Once in the course of meditation he had some spiritual experience; this spurred him to continue the practice.

Seeing this changed behaviour of Nag Mahashay, his father got alarmed lest he should give up worldly life. He thought, marriage would cure the religious malady of his son. So Dindayal selected a bride for his son, and insisted upon the marriage. Nag Mahashay piteously pleaded with his father not to throw him into worldly life and thus hamper the growth of his spiritual progress, but Dindayal would hear no argument. At last the devoted son yielded to the wishes of his father, but how great was the anguish of his heart! From the depth of his heart went prayer to the Almighty that his marriage might not prove a bondage to him. A severe storm blowing over his mind, Nag Mahashay meekly followed his father to his native village, got himself married, and after a few days' stay at home returned to Calcutta.

Nag Mahashay hated the idea of taking service under anybody, so he thought of settling down as a doctor. Now he began to accept fees if

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

offered. But he would never demand money from anybody. Rather he would refuse money if offered in excess of his legitimate dues. Once Nag Mahashay cured a very critical case at the house of the employers of his father. They offered him rich presents, but he would not accept them as the cost of the medicine together with his fees was not so much. This enraged Dindayal living as he did under straitened circumstances. But Nag Mahashay was firm; he said it would be practising untruth if he would accept anything more than his due. Sometimes he would help the poor patients with money from his own pocket. Once one of his patients was suffering from lack of sufficient clothing, Nag Mahashay gave him his own woollen wrapper and ran away from his presence lest it should be refused. Such acts invited sharp reproof from his father, but he found it impossible to change his mode of conduct. He had an extensive practice. Had he been worldly-wise he could easily have amassed money. But on the contrary he remained as poor as ever—sometimes he would find it difficult to make both ends meet.

But even humanitarian works cannot satisfy a heart that is longing for God-vision. After all how little can be done in the matter of removing misery from the world! Though Nag Mahashay gave himself up completely to the service of the poor and the distressed, he was panting for direct perception of the Reality behind the phenomenal world.

At this time Nag Mahashay along with Suresh

and some Brahma devotees would regularly practise meditation sitting on the bank of the Ganges. But the thought that without formal initiation from a Guru spiritual progress cannot be achieved oppressed the mind of Nag Mahashay. Strangely enough, one day while he was bathing in the Ganges, he found his family preceptor coming in a boat. At this he was glad beyond measure; for, what he was seeking for presented itself. Nag Mahashay got himself initiated by him. After the initiation he devoted much greater attention to religious practices. It is said that while once he was in meditation sitting on the bank of the Ganges, there came the flood-tide and swept him away, so deeply absorbed was he. It was only after some time that he got back his consciousness and swam across to the shore.

Suresh once heard in the Brahma Samaj from Keshab Chandra Sen that there was a great saint living at the temple-garden of Dakshineswar. When the news was communicated to Nag Mahashay, he was anxious to see him that very day. When Suresh and Nag Mahashay reached Dakshineswar, somebody gave him the false information that Sri Ramakrishna was away. At this both were sorely disappointed. With heavy hearts they were about to go away, when they observed someone beckoning them from within the doors. They went inside; lo, it was Sri Ramakrishna sitting on a small bedstead. Suresh saluted him with folded palms. Nag Mahashay wanted to take the dust of his feet, but Sri Ramakrishna did not allow it. This greatly grieved

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Nag Mahashay: embodiment of humility as he was, he thought he was not pure enough to touch the feet of a saint.

Sri Ramakrishna inquired of their whereabouts, whether they had married, etc., and remarked: "Live in the world unattached. Be in the world, but not of it. Just see that the dirt of the world does not touch you." Nag Mahashay was looking steadfastly at the face of Sri Ramakrishna when the latter asked, "What are you seeing this way?" Nag Mahashay replied, "I have come to see you, hence I am looking at you."

Talking with them for a while, Sri Ramakrishna asked them to go to the Panchavati and meditate. They obeyed him, and when they returned after meditation, he took them with him to show them round the temples. He was ahead, while Suresh and Nag Mahashay followed him. After passing through other temples, when he entered the Kali temple, he was all on a sudden a changed man. He behaved just like a child before its mother.

Suresh and Nag Mahashay took leave of Ramakrishna in the afternoon. He asked them to repeat the visit so that the acquaintance might deepen.

While returning, the only thought which possessed the mind of Nag Mahashay was, what could that man be—a Sadhu, a saint or some higher being!

This meeting with Sri Ramakrishna inflamed the hunger of Nag Mahashay for God-realisation. He now forgot all other things about the world.

He avoided the company of people. He was always silent—absorbed within his own thoughts. Only when Suresh came, would he talk with him—and that about Sri Ramakrishna.

About a week after the first visit the two friends again went to Dakshineswar. Nag Mahashay was, as it were, in a frenzied condition. Seeing him Sri Ramakrishna fell into ecstasy and burst out, "So glad to see you, it is for you that I am here." Then he seated Nag Mahashay by his side, caressed him and said: "What fear have you? Yours is a highly developed spiritual condition." That day also Sri Ramakrishna sent them to the Panchavati for meditation. After a while he came to them, and directed Nag Mahashay to do him some personal services. Nag Mahashay was so glad. His only sorrow was, he had not been allowed to take the dust of the feet of the Master on the occasion of the first visit. This day when Sri Ramakrishna was alone with Suresh, he remarked that Nag Mahashay was like a blazing fire.

The next time Nag Mahashay went to Dakshineswar alone. To-day also Sri Ramakrishna was in ecstasy at the sight of Nag Mahashay, and began to murmur something inaudible. At this condition of Sri Ramakrishna, Nag Mahashay got afraid. Then Sri Ramakrishna said to him, "Well, just see what is the matter with my feet; you are a doctor, you can examine that." Seeing him talking in a normal condition, Nag Mahashay was relieved. He examined the feet, but found nothing. Sri Ramakrishna asked him to examine

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

again, and thoroughly. Nag Mahashay thought it to be an opportunity offered to him to touch the feet of the Master, which he so greatly longed for. Afterwards Nag Mahashay would remark: "There was no need for asking anything of Sri Ramakrishna. He could read the mind of his devotees, and gave them what they sincerely wanted."

Henceforth Nag Mahashay had the firm conviction that Sri Ramakrishna was God incarnate. He would say, "After a few visits only, I understood him to be an Incarnation of God." If asked how he could know that, he would say: "He himself was gracious enough to make me feel that. Even after hard austerities of thousands of years God cannot be realised without His Grace."

Once Sri Ramakrishna asked Nag Mahashay as to what he thought of him. Nag Mahashay replied with folded hands, "Through your grace I have known what you are." On hearing this answer Sri Ramakrishna went into Samadhi and placed his right foot on the chest of Nag Mahashay. The latter felt a peculiar change within him and saw as if everything around bathed in a flood of Divine Light.

One day while Nag Mahashay was sitting before Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda (then Narendra Nath) entered the room. Sri Ramakrishna told Narendra, pointing to Nag Mahashay: "He has genuine humility. There is no hypocrisy behind it." Soon there began a conversation between the two disciples in the course of which Nag Mahashay said: "Everything is

done by the will of God. Only the ignorant say they are the doers." Narendra, practising Advaita as he did, said: "I don't believe in 'He.' I am everything. The whole universe is my manifestation." Nag Mahashay replied: "You cannot make one black hair grey, what to talk of the universe. Not a leaf on a tree moves without His will." The conversation went on in this strain, which Sri Ramakrishna greatly enjoyed. Sri Ramakrishna then said to Nag Mahashay: "Well, he is a blazing fire. He may say thus." From that time Nag Mahashay had supreme regard for Swami Vivekananda and his spiritual greatness.

Whatever Sri Ramakrishna uttered, even if in joke, was gospel truth to Nag Mahashay. Once Nag Mahashay heard Sri Ramakrishna saying to a devotee, "Well, doctors, lawyers and brokers can hardly achieve anything in the domain of religion." That was enough. Nag Mahashay threw his medical books and medicines into the Ganges and gave up the practice.

The news reached Dindayal at his village home. He became upset and ran to Calcutta. Nag Mahashay could not be persuaded to take up the medical profession again. Dindayal requested his employers to give Nag Mahashay his place, which they did. And then Dindayal returned home with a sigh of relief.

This occupation gave Nag Mahashay greater leisure and opportunity for meditation and spiritual practices. He began to frequent Dakshineswar more often, as a result of which his spirit

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

of renunciation increased and he was determined to give up the world. With such intention one day he went to Sri Ramakrishna, and as soon as he entered his room, the latter began to say in an ecstatic mood: "What is the harm in remaining in the world? If the mind is fixed on God, one is safe. Remain in the world like Janaka and set an example to householders." Nag Mahashay was stupefied. He was resolved to leave the world, but the obstacle came from the very man whose life aroused in him the desire. What could be done! Nag Mahashay's opinion was: "What escaped from the lips of Sri Ramakrishna none could resist. He would tell in a word or two the path which was suitable for a particular man." So Nag Mahashay returned home, obeying the behest of the Master.

But it was impossible for Nag Mahashay to do the normal duties of life any longer. Day and night he was in agony as God was not realised. Sometimes he would roll in the dust, sometimes he would fall on thorny bushes which caused him injury. He forgot all about food. When Suresh would come he would force him to eat, otherwise he would be without food. He would return home sometimes in the afternoon, sometimes at dead of night. He behaved like one deranged in mind.

During this period Nag Mahashay had to go to his village home. When his wife found him in this mental state, she was terrified. She easily understood that he had no vestige of desire for worldly life. He also explained to her that fixed

as all his thoughts were on God, it was no longer possible for him to live a worldly life.

How abnormal—if abnormal it should at all be termed—was Nag Mahashay's conduct at this period can be seen from the following incident. In the corner of their house his sister grew a gourd-plant. Once a cow was tied near it. The cow wanted to eat the plant but could not reach it. He saw this and felt compassion for the cow. He untied it and allowed it to eat the plant. This naturally enraged his father, who rebuked him saying: "You yourself will not earn money, and on the contrary you will do what will bring loss to the family. You have given up medical practice. How will you maintain yourself?" Nag Mahashay said: "Please don't worry about that. God will look after me." The infuriated father said: "Yes, I know. Now you will go about naked and live on frogs."

Nag Mahashay gave no further answer, threw away his clothes, brought a dead frog, and while eating it said to his father: "Both of your commandments are fulfilled. No longer please worry about me, this is my earnest request." Thinking that his son had gone mad, Dindayal told his daughter-in-law, "Let none go against his wishes even to the slightest degree."

After returning to Calcutta, Nag Mahashay, in one of his visits to Dakshineswar, expressed great sorrow to the Master that he had no real self-surrender to God, that he still believed in the efficacy of his own personal effort apart from the will of God. The Master consoled him with kindly

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

advice. Seeing the burning spirit of Vairagya in him, Sri Ramakrishna again advised him to remain in the world. Nag Mahashay said that the sight of misery all around oppressed him too much. Sri Ramakrishna told him that no taint would touch him if he remained in the world, on the contrary everybody would be amazed to see his life.

Nag Mahashay could no longer attend to his duties. Seeing this his employers freed him from all work and arranged that he could get an allowance, so that the family of such a noble soul might not suffer from privation. Sri Ramakrishna was very glad to hear this news.

Nag Mahashay now engaged himself in more severe spiritual practices, and began to go to Dakshineswar very often. Formerly he would avoid going there on Sundays. His idea was: "Scholars, Pandits, many great men go there on Sundays. Unlettered as I am I shall be a misfit in their company." So he did not know much of the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna. But as his visits were now very frequent he came to know some of them. In one such visit the Master introduced him to Girish Chandra Ghosh, and they were fast friends all their lives.

Nag Mahashay was very particular about control of palate. He would not use salt or sugar in his food in order to restrain the desire for good dishes. Once he lived for two or three days only on bran. He could not continue it simply because his neighbour made it impossible for him to get the supply. But he would say: "I did not find

the least difficulty in living on bran. If the mind always remains busy with thought about the quality of food, how shall I remember God?"

A large number of beggars would come to Nag Mahashay's house every day for alms, and poor though he was none would go from him empty-handed. Once a begging friar came to him when he had only a little quantity of rice, just sufficient for his next meal. He gave that to him in great devotion and himself remained without food.

Nag Mahashay could not stand worldly talks. If anybody introduced such subjects before him, skilfully he would stop it. If he got angry or annoyed with anyone, he would mercilessly beat his own body with whatever could be had near at hand as self-punishment. He would not indulge in criticising others, nor would he contradict anyone. Once unwillingly he said something in opposition to a man. As soon as he was conscious of this, he took a piece of stone and struck his head with that so severely that there was profuse bleeding. It took about a month for the wound to heal. He would say, "Right punishment, since my mind became so wicked."

To kill his passions he would sometimes take to long fasts. Because of his headache, on medical advice, he gave up bathing the last twenty years of his life. Over and above that his severe austerities gave him a very rugged appearance. Girish Chandra Ghosh would opine, "Nag Mahashay knocked his egotism so severely on the head that it could not rise again." While going his way, Nag Mahashay could not be ahead of

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

another—for that meant self-importance. Even if he met a poor beggar, he would stand behind him. Nobody would be allowed to prepare tobacco for him, but he would do that for one and all, and found delight in doing so.

During the last days of Sri Ramakrishna when he was laid up in bed, Nag Mahashay would rarely go to him. He would say, "I cannot bear to remember the sight of suffering, much less can I see that." Once Ramakrishna was suffering from burning sensation. Nag Mahashay was near by. Sri Ramakrishna asked him to come nearer so that by touching his body his pain might vanish. When he did that Sri Ramakrishna remained long embracing him.

About a week before his passing away, the Master, in the presence of Nag Mahashay, showed his desire to taste Amlaki fruit. But that was not the season for that fruit. Everybody thought that Amlaki was out of the question at that time. But Nag Mahashay began cogitating, "When the Master has said that, the fruit will surely be found somewhere." With this thought he went out. He could not be seen for two days. He was going from garden to garden in search of Amlaki. On the third day he came with a piece of Amlaki in his hand.

Once Nag Mahashay went to Sri Ramakrishna during the latter's illness. It was an *Ekdashi* day—the fasting day for Nag Mahashay. A disciple requested him to take something, not knowing his practice. Nag Mahashay could break the practice only if the food was made holy by the

touch of Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna understood this and did that. While sitting for his meal, Nag Mahashay ate the whole of the food given to him and then began to eat the leaf itself. Well, it was sacramental food, was it not touched by the Master! Henceforth when sacramental food was given to Nag Mahashay, the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna took precaution that he did not repeat the incident.

When Sri Ramakrishna passed away, Nag Mahashay gave up food and remained confined in his bed. He would not stir out. The news reached Swami Vivekananda, the refuge of all devotees of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Vivekananda with two of his brother-disciples went to him. It was only with difficulty that Swami Vivekananda could persuade him to take food. "That body should not be given food with which God has not been realised."—that was the idea of Nag Mahashay.

After the passing of Sri Ramakrishna Nag Mahashay went to his village home, even against the wishes of his best friends. For, did not the Master ask him to remain at home! His words could not be infringed even slightly!

The rest of his life was spent at Deobhog, with occasional visits to Calcutta. There he lived his unostentatious life, hiding his blazing spirituality under a cover of great humility. But as fire cannot be hidden, so with spirituality. Soon the name of Nag Mahashay spread far and wide. People began to flock to Deobhog, but he was as humble as ever. So complete and withal so

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

natural was his self-effacement! This phenomenon itself was a great thing. Swami Vivekananda used to say that the whole of East Bengal was blessed because of the birth of Nag Mahashay.

Outwardly he was just like an ordinary man. From his appearance nobody could guess that he was such a great saint. Only those who knew him intimately or watched his conduct would be astonished at his greatness. His life was full of many wonderful episodes, everyone as astonishing as another.

Once a devotee came to the house of Nag Mahashay late at night. There was no fuel in the house. Nag Mahashay cut the ridge-pole of his room to make that into fuel for cooking.

Whoever would go to his house was received as God in the form of a human being come to bless him. He suffered from colic pain. At times the pain would be very very severe. Once while he was attacked with such pain, some eight or ten persons came. How to feed them? There was not sufficient rice in the house. He went to the market, bought some rice and was carrying that home on his head—he would never take the services of servants—but on the way the pain increased. He fell down and could no more walk. The pain was nothing to him; his only thought was, guests were at home, their meals would not be ready in time. When the pain lessened a bit he started again, and reaching home begged pardon of the guests that they were inconvenienced.

Once some guests came at night. It was the

rainy reason. All the rooms were leaking except one which was Nag Mahashay's bedroom. That was given to the guests, and he with his wife passed the whole night in prayer and meditation sitting in the porch. He considered the day to be very blessed as he was privileged to serve God in the guests.

And how glad he would be if any disciple or devotee of Sri Ramakrishna visited his house! Once Swami Turiyananda along with another monk came to Nag Mahashay's house in a boat. Nag Mahashay was so overpowered with joy that he became almost unconscious.

In this respect he would make no distinction between the old and the young. Once two young monks from the Belur Math went to Deobhog to pay respects to Nag Mahashay. But Nag Mahashay was so respectful to them, that he became a terror to the young monks. His services to them took the form of worship, as it were. They were eager to escape as early as possible from such an embarrassing position. In spite of his earnest requests, to continue the stay, they bade him good-bye. He accompanied them as far as the railway station. The train was crowded. The monks tried to elbow their way into one compartment, but the occupants held them back. Seeing that the monks were treated disrespectfully, Nag Mahashay began to cry in agony and to beat his forehead: was not the suffering of the monks due to his ill luck! At the sight of the painful condition of Nag Mahashay, the fellow passengers let the monks in and made

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

enough room for them in the compartment. And then he was at rest.

He was ever ready to serve all, but would not allow anybody to serve him. He lived in thatched cottages that required annual repair. But that could not be done in his presence as services of others would not be tolerated. His wife would get the house repaired, when he would be away. Once the house was badly in need of repair. The wife of Nag Mahashay engaged a servant. He climbed the roof for his work. Nag Mahashay saw this and humbly requested him to cease from doing that. The servant would hear no nay. It was ■ privilege for him to repair a house which sheltered a saint. At this Nag Mahashay began to beat his own forehead in great agony. What, for the happiness of this body another should undergo labour ! The servant saw the mental suffering of Nag Mahashay and came down. Oh the joy of Nag Mahashay when the servant ceased from work. He began to fan him, and prepared tobacco for him. While going in a boat he would not allow the servants to row. He would himself do that. For that reason no one liked to go in the same boat with him.

He was, as it were, humbler than dust. But he was as fierce as anything if anybody criticised his Guru or the children of his Guru in his presence. In this matter he was no respecter of personalities. A saint of the neighbourhood, who unguardedly passed some uncharitable remarks against Sri Ramakrishna while Nag Mahashay was visiting him, got sharp reproof from Nag

Mahashay. A rich man of the locality who commanded great respect was humbled by Nag Mahashay because he committed a similar offence. Once while Nag Mahashay was going to the Belur Math in a boat, a fellow passenger criticised the activities of the monastery. At this Nag Mahashay got so infuriated that he struck terror into the heart of the culprit, who thereupon left the boat as quickly as possible.

It was a sight for the gods to see when he would go to any place associated with Sri Ramakrishna, or if he met any devotee or disciple of the Master. When he would meet the Holy Mother, he would lose, as it were, all outward consciousness. Long before he would actually meet her, he would be on another plane. He would behave like a man, from whom the outer world was vanishing—and he would only utter the words, “Mother, Mother.” Once, coming to the house where the Holy Mother lived, he began to touch the threshold with his head in reverence so vehemently that his head began to bleed.

Once he went to Dakshineswar, but on coming near the room where Sri Ramakrishna lived, his agony became so great because he could no longer expect to see him there, that he fell to the ground and began to roll on the earth. When he would go to the monastery at Alambazar, or the Belur Math, he would thrill with emotion; on his coming the whole atmosphere would at once change. The bystanders would be, as it were, transported to a different region. Beginning with Swami Vivekananda all monks would hold him

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

in great reverence. Whenever he would visit the monastery all work would stop. Everybody would flock to him to enjoy his holy presence. Once he came to the Belur Math to see Swami Vivekananda, who had just returned from America. How great was his joy to see the Swami who had been the bearer of the message of the Master to the world! Swami Vivekananda asked him to stay in the monastery. But he would not do that even for a single night. Had not the Master directed him to live in the world?

Nag Mahashay had love not only for all human beings, but it extended to all lower creatures and even to the vegetable kingdom. It was difficult to persuade him to get into a carriage drawn by a horse, because the horse would suffer thereby. Once a fisherman brought some living fish for sale. They were jumping in fear. Nag Mahashay bought all the fish and set them free in the neighbouring pond. Seeing this, the fisherman fled from his presence in wonder. One day a cobra was seen in his courtyard. He would not allow that to be killed. He would say that it is not the snake of the jungle but the snake within one's own mind that injures a man. Sometimes he would feel pain even if leaves were struck off a tree in his presence.

He would see the Divine will in everything—good or bad. He suffered from continued colic pain. He thought the disease was a godsend because it forced him to think of God. Once while he was asleep a cat scratched one of his eyeballs. Others were aghast at the sight. But he was calm

and quiet. It was nothing to him. Why should one be so much anxious for bodily happiness? Once he had pains in both his hands which compelled him to keep them together. He thought it was a device of God to keep him in a posture of humility.

After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, when Nag Mahashay came to his village home, he thought of living alone in a cottage in a solitary place. Knowing his intention, his wife gave him perfect freedom to live as he liked but requested him not to go away. Being thus assured by his pious wife, he lived like a monk though in the world. His wife would say with regard to him: "With the name of the Lord on his lips, he knocked all animal propensities on the head. He lived amidst fire, but was not scorched by it."

Nag Mahashay once remarked that even birds and beasts were to him the manifestation of the Divine Mother. No wonder all carnality was gone from him.

Once a man belonging to the family of his preceptor, under the instruction of Dindayal, requested Nag Mahashay to seek the perpetuation of his lineage. The very idea was so shocking to him that he fell to the ground like one in a swoon. "Such an improper request from you?"—with these words he began to strike his forehead with a piece of stone. It began to bleed. The man felt repentant and withdrew the request. Nag Mahashay was calm, and bowed down before him.

"Sex and gold are the two obstacles to spiritual progress"—these were the words of Sri

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Ramakrishna. The great disciple of the Master completely rooted out the desire for them.

While living at Deobhog, a relation of the previous employer of Nag Mahashay was ill of small-pox. Nag Mahashay gave up medical practice, but under great pressure he had to suggest a medicine, which cured the patient. And when the party earnestly requested him to accept a sum of money as a reward, he began to cry in agony to be saved from the temptation. The party thought, "Here is a god on earth." Many such incidents can be cited.

Nag Mahashay hated to play the rôle of a teacher. But many lives were changed as a result of his influence. His house was a place of pilgrimage to many. Innumerable were the persons who flocked to him. But he was humility itself. He thought it a privilege to serve all who came to him. So great was his attention to the physical comforts of the visitors that they all thought they had come as if to a house of their intimate relative. Amongst his devotees could be counted even ■ Mohammedan, who looked upon him as a *Pir*. Like his Master, Nag Mahashay was very catholic in his views. He had equal veneration for the devotees of all sects. He made no distinction between a Hindu, a Mohammedan or a Christian. He bowed down before a mosque and uttered the name of Jesus when passing by a church.

His religious view was that every thing depends on the grace of God. But man has to pray. If anyone prays earnestly, and if he has no earthly desire, God's grace is sure to come.

NAG MAHASHAY

During his last illness he suffered much physically. But not a word of complaint came from him. His faith in the goodness of God was as strong as ever. There was physical ailment, but his mind was fixed on God—calm and serene at the approach of Eternal Life.

The physical existence of this saintly life ended in December, 1899. But the name of Nag Mahashay is more than a memory. It is a force—it is a source of inspiration, it gives hope and courage to many to aspire after a better life. The strange episodes of his life pass from mouth to mouth, and those who hear feel as if they have a glimpse of wonderland. Such things are not possible in this world of ours !

II

GIRISH CHANDRA GHOSH

Girish Chandra Ghosh was the bright example of how the touch of a Seer can turn a sinner into a saint. From the depth of inoral degradation he was raised by the influence of the God-man of Dakshineswar to a height of glory from where his moral and spiritual influence spread through different channels to a very wide area. "There is no sin which I have not committed," Girish once said, "but still there is no end of grace I have received from the Master." He did not seek God but God sought him. But once his mind turned towards God, he stormed the citadel of Heaven, as it were, and compelled God to love him with all his faults and weakness of the flesh. His was an indomitable and invincible spirit. He was heroic in every respect—in his self-indulgence in early days when his nature was turbulent, as also as in his dynamic faith in latter years when his thoughts turned towards religion. When he was an atheist, nobody dared argue with him about the existence of any Reality behind the material universe; when he was a social rebel, people thought he was lost beyond redemption; when he got interested in religion, his faith was so great that it was the despair of many religious-minded persons and it was so virile that many a lukewarm devotee would

GIRISH CHANDRA GHOSH

throng round him just to kindle the fire of devotion from him.

Girish Chandra was born on the 28th of February, 1844, at Bosepara Lane of Baghbazar in Calcutta. The eighth child of his pious parents, he became from his very childhood the recipient of the excessive love and indulgence of his father, Nilkamal Ghosh. The aged father, a book-keeper in the office of a merchant, was held in high esteem by his neighbours for his piety, honesty, philanthropy and worldly wisdom. Girish Chandra's mother was remarkable also for her simplicity and artless devotion to the Lord. But the premature death of her first son unnerved her so much that she did not venture to fondle Girish, and kept up an assumed air of indifference.

Thus reared up with the alternate love and indifference of his parents, Girish grew up to be a buoyant and healthy young lad. But his turbulent nature became a source of anxiety to all. His boyish importunities sometimes overstepped all bounds of decorum and reasonableness. But another trait that was noticeable in him was his unusual eagerness to listen to the recital of Pauranic stories. In the evening when the young and the old members of the family gathered together after the day's work to hear the narration of these stories from the mouth of an aged aunt of Girish's father, the boy would also silently take his seat in their midst and listen in an absorbed mood which would belie for the time being his erstwhile boisterousness. His eyes

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

would even glisten with tears of alternate joy and grief when any pleasant or pathetic anecdote was recounted with deep emotion and fervour. Indeed these apparently contradictory traits of his early life disclose the real stuff he was made of. It was these elements of his nature that first led him astray and then to the right path and enabled him in after years to tide over the manifold trials and tribulations of his life and reach the plenitude of glory that rarely falls to the lot of ordinary human beings.

Girish lost his mother at the age of eleven, and he naturally began to depend entirely upon the love and guidance of his aged father from then on. Nilkamal was shrewd enough to fathom the depth of his son's nature and extended as much freedom as possible to the boy to develop in his own way. But this undue indulgence interfered not a little with the boy's early education. The rigour of discipline and the mode of teaching obtaining in schools did not find much favour with Girish, and he changed from one school to another with the tacit consent of his father. But human life is not always smooth sailing. Nilkamal, bent under the weight of his age and the repeated blows of family bereavements, very soon fell seriously ill. He began to sink day by day, and one day bade final adieu to this mortal life.

Exactly a year after the death of his father, Girish entered into married life. Thereafter his studies in school did not proceed satisfactorily, and, as expected, he was plucked in the Entrance

GIRISH CHANDRA GHOSH

Examination. Thus his academic education came to an end. Now, freed from the vigilance of ■ watchful father and the obligation of a student life, the dormant instincts of his truculent nature began to manifest themselves in all their nakedness. Within a few years he became a veritable terror to the neighbours. His father-in-law, who was a book-keeper in the John Atkinson Company, coming to know of his son-in-law's wanton excesses and turbulent habits lost no time in employing him in his own office as a probationer. After that he acted in various capacities in different merchant offices for about fifteen years. It was during this period when some portion of the bubbling energies of his youth was harnessed to the wheel of official duty, that his latent literary ability was stimulated to activity under the careful guidance of his vastly erudite maternal uncle. But, notwithstanding this new-born fondness for study and literary work, Girish soon broke loose from all moral restraint. He was seized with an irresistible urge from within to drink life to the lees, and he was very soon dragged down to the worst state of moral turpitude. But his other qualities of head and heart—his love for the poor and the sick, his spirit of self-sacrifice and of service to mitigate the sufferings of the helpless, and, above all, his brilliance as a poet and *litterateur*—served to overshadow his moral foibles and soon earned for him a place of distinction in the circle of the intelligentsia of the time.

At this time Girish suffered from a number of

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

family mishaps. One after another, two of his sisters, two brothers and eventually in 1874 his own wife departed from this earthly life, leaving Girish entirely forlorn in the vast wilderness of the world. These pangs of separation coupled with the rankling memories of his own immoral excesses rendered his life almost unbearable. So, to assuage the excruciating pains of his lacerated heart, he threw himself ardently into literary pursuits and thus got an opportunity to give expression to his pent-up emotions in and through a series of exquisite poetical compositions. But very soon a grave financial crisis stared him in the face: the Company in which he had so long been serving failed and he was thrown out of employment. Fortunately, his immediate appointment as Head Clerk in the office of the Indian League, started under the auspices of Sisir Kumar Ghosh, the then Editor of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, came to him as a welcome surprise and gave him temporary relief.

About this time, through the insistence of his eldest sister and other friends, Girish was once again united in wedlock. But six months had scarcely elapsed when he was suddenly attacked with a virulent type of cholera. His iron constitution, which his reckless habits and excessive drinking could not break down, soon became extremely emaciated and weak, and the physicians gave up all hope of his recovery. Girish, surrounded by his weeping relatives, lay almost senseless on the bed, and in that state of semi-consciousness he saw the vision of ■ resplendent

lady¹ clad in a red-bordered Sari just approaching him with comely deportment and ■ compassionate look, and asking him affectionately to take the holy "Mahaprasad" (the offering made to Lord Jagannath at Puri) which she had brought for his recovery. Girish took it in his mouth as directed. and, to the infinite joy of all, he regained consciousness and was soon cured of this fell disease. But misfortunes do not come singly. Soon after this unexpected recovery Girish once again became involved in some serious trouble, and he found no means to get out of this hopeless predicament. In utter despair and in the agony of his heart he raised his unwilling hands to God Shiva and prayed for His divine grace to rescue him from the meshes of his present tribulations. His prayers were answered and the darkening clouds that were gathered on the horizon rolled back to his great joy and relief. It must be remembered that Girish had from his youth been nurtured in the society of sceptics and atheists and had always plumed himself on his bold defiance of all that was divine or mysterious. But now, after his miraculous escape from imminent death and other dangers through divine intercession, his mind began to falter and question the supremacy of the intellect in solving the baffling mysteries of life. His mind, though

¹Regarding this female figure Girish himself stated in after years to his brother-disciples thus: "Sixteen years later (i.e., in 1891) when I first visited Jayrambati to see the Holy Mother (the wife of Sri Ramakrishna) I found to my surprise and delight that the lady that saved my life with the holy Mahaprasad was none other than the Holy Mother herself."

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

released for the time being from the octopus of rank atheism, could not, however, settle down to ■ firm conviction, and continued to swing like ■ pendulum between doubt and belief.

In 1879 he took a momentous step in his life which made his name immortal in the dramatic history of Bengal. So long his relation with the stage had only been that of an amateur. But from now on, his connection became more intimate, because he chose the Bengali stage as the principal arena of his activity and also as the primary source of his livelihood. He not only threw himself heart and soul into the composition of Pauranic, social, historical and religious dramas but also trained actors and actresses in the histrionic art and thus popularised the stage as a national institution. He himself was an actor *par excellence* and his impersonations of many conflicting characters in one and the same drama in successive scenes were inimitable and drew unstinted admiration from one and all. In fact, with his creative genius he imparted ■ new life to the Bengali stage, placed it on a footing of dignity and honour and thus enlisted the much-needed support hitherto denied to it by persons of light and leading. He began to wield his powerful pen with consummate skill, and very soon his fame as a dramatist reached ■ very great height. In the hands of Girish Chandra the Bengali drama outgrew its infant stage and entered into ■ glorious period. In 1883 the Star Theatre was started under his initiative and placed on a stable foundation.

But this kind of material success could hardly silence the still sad voice of a guilty conscience. The pricking sense of a life that had suffered a moral shipwreck made him ill at ease. In calmer moments when the excitement and fever of daily activity became subdued, the lurid picture of his dissipated life became unrolled before his vision and he was smitten with grief and remorse. Regarding this state of mental tension and uneasiness as well as concerning his previous wanton excesses and training in the modern school of atheism Girish himself has written: "My early training, want of a guardian from childhood, the tumultuous youthful tendencies—all were driving me away from the path of righteousness. Atheism was the order of the day. Belief in the existence of God was considered foolish and a sign of weakness. So in the circle of friends one was to prove the non-existence of God if one cared at all for prestige and dignity. I used to scoff at those who believed in God, and turning over a few pages of science, I concluded to the full satisfaction of my mind that religion was but a matter of imagination, that it was but a means to frighten people into keeping away from evil deeds, and that wisdom lay in achieving one's selfish ends by hook or by crook. But in this world such wisdom does not last long. Evil days bring home hard truths. Under this tutorship I learnt that there is no effective means to hide evil deeds; somehow they all take air. Yes, I learnt. But the deeds had already begun to bear fruit. A hopeless future was painted in fierce colours on the mind's

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

canvas. But it was only the beginning of the punishment yet in store, from which there seemed no hope of any escape. Friendless, surrounded on all sides by dangers, with resolute foes aiming at my utter ruin, and my own misdeeds offering them ample opportunities of wreaking vengeance on me,—at such a juncture I thought: ‘Does God really exist? Can He show a way out if one calls on Him?’ ”

We have already seen how his prayers were answered on more than one occasion. With the advance of years his true self began to reveal itself according as his arrogance and self-conceit received hard knocks from adversities in life. He instinctively began to feel that behind the sparkling variety of phenomena there must be an Inscrutable Power that shapes and guides the destinies of all, and this belief of Girish was strengthened in a large measure by a string of occurrences over which he had no control. He was now convinced that God was real; but as doubt had become ingrained in his very nature he still vacillated under the stress of peculiar circumstances and he oftentimes ran for help and guidance to friends, who were unanimous in their opinion that without the help of a Guru doubt could not be got over permanently. But reason refused to call man ■ Guru—for Guru, according to the scriptural injunctions, was to be looked upon as God on earth. The very idea seemed revolting to him, for nothing could be more blasphemous. And this struggle raged unabated in his mind and gave him no peace

GIRISH CHANDRA GHOSH

and rest. It was at this psychological moment that an incident of deep spiritual significance occurred which proved a turning point in his chequered career.

Girish had already come to know from the *Indian Mirror* that a Paramahansa lived at Dakshineswar and that Keshab Chandra Sen with his disciples paid frequent visits to him. Out of curiosity he one day went to see Sri Ramakrishna when the latter had come to the house of the renowned attorney Dinanath Basu of Bosepara Lane. It was evening, and the lamps were lit. But Sri Ramakrishna, who was then in an ecstatic state, did not see the light. He inquired if it was evening. Girish thought this to be the height of absurdity and left the place in disgust. Some years after this incident Sri Ramakrishna paid a visit to the house of Balaram Bose of Baghbazar. Girish was also invited. He was agreeably surprised to find that the conduct of this Paramahansa was quite different from that of other Paramahansas and Yogis. Girish sat for a few minutes in silent admiration for the saint's God-intoxication, humility and sweet demeanour, when Babu Sisir Kumar Ghosh, Editor of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, who was also present there and did not seem to have much respect for Sri Ramakrishna, said to Girish: "Well, let us go. We have had enough of this." Girish wanted to stay, but had to yield to his friend's request. This was his second visit.

It was the month of August, 1884, when *Chaitanya Lila* of Girish was first staged at

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

the Star Theatre. The play created ■ sensation and brought forth the admiration of all for its profundity of thought and directness of appeal to the religious consciousness of people in general. One day Girish was pacing in the courtyard of the theatre, when a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna came to him and said: "Paramahansa Deva has come to see the play. Will you kindly give him a seat or shall we purchase a ticket?" "He will be admitted free," replied Girish, "but others will have to pay." He was about to advance and receive the Master, when he found that he was already within the compound. Sri Ramakrishna saluted Girish. Girish returned the salute, but the Master bowed again. This was repeated again. Girish stopped short lest the salutation should go on *ad infinitum*. He conducted the Master to a box, engaged a servant to fan him, and feeling indisposed, went home. This was his third meeting with the Master, which came on about the 21st of September, 1884.

About this time Girish had picked up an acquaintance with a devout Vaishnava painter with whom he had frequent intimate talks about domestic affairs and the Vaishnava religion. On one occasion in the course of a conversation he told Girish that his Chosen Deity every day actually partook of a portion of the food offered to Him, and added that none could experience such a divine favour without the grace of a Guru. The artless candour and devotion with which he narrated the affair so profoundly impressed Girish that on his return home he shut himself up in his

own closet and wept bitterly. Needless to say, his heart now yearned for a spiritual guide.

A few days after this incident when Girish was sitting on the verandah of a neighbour near a crossing of two roads, he saw Sri Ramakrishna accompanied by a group of devotees slowly passing that way towards the house of Balaram Bose. One of the devotees pointed towards Girish from a distance and said something in whispers to the Master. He at once saluted Girish and went on his way. He had not gone far when Girish felt that something was pulling him towards Sri Ramakrishna. He could not sit still. He felt so much drawn towards him that he longed to run and overtake him. Just then a devotee came from the Master and invited him to go there. He followed him as one charmed. Sri Ramakrishna seated himself in the parlour of Balaram, and Girish also took his seat near him. Girish asked, "Sir, what is a Guru?" "He is like a liaison officer who brings about the union of the Lord and the devoted soul," was the reply. He further added, "Your Guru has been selected." "What is a Mantra?"—again asked Girish. "God's name," was the answer. The talk then drifted on to many topics—as if they were intimately known to each other for many years. He asked Girish to show him a theatrical performance again. Girish agreed. It was settled that he would come to see *Prahlad Charitra*. Shortly after, Girish saluted the Master and left with a devotee. The latter asked Girish, "How did you find him?" "A great devotee," answered Girish.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

He was now full of joy as he had no longer to trouble himself with the search for a Guru.

Some time after this meeting with the Master, Girish was seated in the green-room of his theatre, when a devotee, Devendra Nath Mazumdar, came to him in haste and said that Sri Ramakrishna had come to see the performance (*Prahlad Charitra*). "Very well," replied Girish, "please conduct him to a box." "But won't you come and receive him?" he asked. "Why," said Girish, "can't he get down from the coach without me?" But he went nevertheless, and found Sri Ramakrishna about to alight. But as soon as he looked upon his serene countenance Girish was smitten with remorse for not having been more cordial in welcoming the saint. He took the Master upstairs, touched his feet without knowing why he did so, and presented him with a rose. The Master returned it saying: "Flowers are for gods or for fashionable folk. I am neither." In the course of conversation Sri Ramakrishna said, "Your mind is not all sincere." Girish thought within himself that faults and foibles there were indeed many. So he asked, "How will they go?" "Have faith," came the reply.

Another day in the house of Ramchandra Dutt Girish met the Master who was in an ecstatic mood. After the singing was over, Sri Ramakrishna went into the parlour where Girish also followed him. Girish asked, "Sir, will the crookedness of my mind ever be removed?" "Surely," replied Sri Ramakrishna. Thrice the question was repeated and thrice the Master gave the same

answer. Among those present was Manomohan Mitra, who said: "You have been answered. Why do you tease him thus?" Pocketing the affront Girish thought: "He is right. If a man cannot take another's word the first time, ■ hundred repetitions will not make him do so." He saluted the Master and returned to his theatre.

Girish now felt more and more drawn towards the Master. Some time after this he went to Dakshineswar and found Sri Ramakrishna seated on a blanket on the south verandah of his room. The Master was then talking with a young devotee. Girish bowed to the Master, and at once the words came out of the Master's lips as if from one nearest and dearest to him, "We were just now talking of you; really, just ask him." The Master, then, proceeded to give some instructions when Girish interrupted him saying: "I don't want instructions. I myself have written many such in my books. Please do something tangible for me." At this the Master was very pleased and smiled. This divine smile made Girish feel for the time being that his mind had become completely purged of all impurities. While taking leave, Girish asked: "Sir, I have come here and seen you. Shall I continue what I have been doing?" "Yes," was the answer. Girish felt from this that his connection with the theatre was not harmful. He was now convinced that the great saint had given him shelter and that the realisation of God would now be an easy affair. He was filled with infinite faith and courage, for already he was beginning to have ■

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

glimpse of what Guru really meant. The fear of death—that great terror—too had gone. Girish became a steadfast devotee of Sri Ramakrishna.

Wonderful was his relationship with the Master. Sri Ramakrishna showed deep affection for him. As a father loves his children equally, so the Guru loves his disciples all alike. But he does not give equal indulgence to every one. The Master called Girish a heroic devotee and suffered him to have any indulgence he liked. The great Master used to call him a Bhairava (divine companion of Shiva). Regarding this particular epithet, Sri Ramakrishna himself once said: "In the temple of Kali I was one day engaged in meditation. I found that a naked boy came tripping there with a tuft of hair on the crown of his head and a flask of wine under his left armpit and a vessel of nectar in the right hand. 'Who are you?' I asked. 'I am a Bhairava,' replied he. On my asking the reason of his coming, he answered, 'To do your work.' When Girish in mature years came to me, I recognised that Bhairava in him." The Master knew that at heart Girish was tender, faithful and sincere.

A great vice of Girish was his inordinate incontinence. One night under the influence of liquor he abused the Master in the theatre hall in most indecent language. The enraged devotees were about to punish his insolence, but Sri Ramakrishna held them back. The Master realising the inner earnestness and sincerity of Girish kept quiet and returned to Dakshineswar. But Girish, like an excessively indulged

and spoilt child, felt no qualms of conscience for having heaped so much abuse on the Master and moved about as freely as ever. Friends dinned into his ears that he had done wrong and he too understood it slowly. Many even complained to Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar against Girish and requested him not to go to him any more. But there was one amongst the devotees, Ramchandra Dutt, who told the Master: "Sir, you will have to put up with this as well. He can only give what he has. He has worshipped you through abusing you. The serpent king of the *Bhagavata* said to the Lord Sri Krishna, 'My Lord, you have given me poison, where shall I get nectar to give you?' Similarly, Girish has worshipped you with whatever you have given him." Sri Ramakrishna simply smiled and said to the other devotees: "Just hear his words. Get me a coach. I shall go to Girish's house to-day." Thus without caring about the objections of the devotees and for the grilling heat of the noonday sun, Sri Ramakrishna went to the house of Girish and found him smitten with anguish and remorse. The kind and affectionate words of the Master banished all gloom from his mind and filled it with a flood of joy. A few days after this, the Master went to the house of a devotee in Calcutta. Girish was also present there. He was brooding with a broken heart over his own misdeeds when the Master in a semi-conscious mood spoke out, "Girish Ghosh, don't worry about it; people will be astonished at the marvellous change that will come over you." Girish heaved a sigh of relief.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

The Master knew that mere words would not induce Girish to break his deep-rooted habits. So while allowing him every freedom to pursue the dictates of his nature, he gradually brought him under the spell of his transcendent love which served as the greatest alchemy in Girish's life and worked miracles. One day Girish went to see an actress who was ill, and became so tipsy from inordinate drinking that he had to spend the night at her house. It was the first time that he had slept in such a place. In the morning when he had become sober he understood what had happened, and stung with remorse, started directly for Dakshineswar, not however without a flask of wine. Dismounting from the coach, he ran to the Master and clasping his feet began to weep. In the meantime Sri Ramakrishna had told a devotee to bring Girish's shoes, scarf and flask from the coach. When Girish's emotion had subsided he felt a desire for a drink and was much disturbed when he found that the carriage in which he had left the flask was gone. But the Master produced the flask, and Girish drank before all. When he realised what he had done, he was much ashamed. Sri Ramakrishna only said, "All right, enjoy yourself to your fill; it won't be for long." After this Girish seldom touched liquor.

Regarding the boundless love of Sri Ramakrishna for him Girish himself has written: "Now and then he (the Master) used to come to my theatre. He would carry sweets for me all the way from Dakshineswar. He knew I would

not take them unless he first took something of them. So he would just taste a bit and then give me the rest to eat, and I took them with infinite joy like a child. One day I went to Dakshineswar. He had almost finished his noonday meal. He asked me to take his porridge. I at once sat down to take it. He said, 'Let me feed you with my own hands!' Like a little child I went on taking from his hands, and he, with his wonderfully soft hand, began to feed me. He scraped off the very last drop from the cup and took it to my mouth, just as mothers do when they feed their little ones. I totally forgot that I was an adult. I felt as though I was the darling of my mother, and mother was feeding her dear child. When I remember that these lips of mine had come in contact with unworthy lips and that his holy, divine hand touched and held up food to them, I go mad, as it were, with the surge of an ineffable emotion and think, 'Did it really happen or was it but a dream?' He would have me eat, sitting in front of me all the while. And when I had finished eating, he would himself pour water on my hand to wash it. One day he asked me to massage his feet. I was unwilling. 'What nonsense! Who will now sit down and massage his feet?' But now when its memory returns I become overwhelmed with remorse. It is only the thought of his infinite love that gives me solace. Sri Ramakrishna instructed all to desist from telling lies. I told him, 'Sir, I tell numerous lies. How shall I be truthful?' He replied, 'Don't worry about that. You are above truth and

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

falsehood.' When I feel tempted to tell lies, I at once visualise the Master's figure, and lies will not come out. Sri Ramakrishna has full sway over my heart—he has it by the right of his love. Lust, anger and all the terrible passions vanish if one feels this transcendental love of his—no other spiritual practice is required. This realisation is the highest goal of human life."

One day in the course of a conversation Sri Ramakrishna told Girish that along with his work he must remember God at least in the morning and evening. He looked at Girish as if expecting a reply. "That is a very simple thing to do," Girish thought, "but I am a busy man with no fixed hours for food or sleep. I shall surely forget to remember God at those stated hours. So, how can I promise that?" Sri Ramakrishna read his mind and said, "All right, if you cannot do that, remember God before meals and at bed-time." Girish was not willing to promise even that—such was the irregularity of his life, and besides he was by nature opposed to any hard and fast rule and the slightest restraint was galling to him. Sri Ramakrishna realised his perplexity and said finally: "So you are unwilling to agree to this even. All right, give me your power of attorney. Henceforth I assume responsibility for you. You need not do anything." Girish heaved a sigh of relief. He said to himself: "Ah, now I am saved. I shall now be free as air, and my bark will be guided to the haven of peace by his infinite power." One day Girish said about some trifling matter, "Yes, I will do this." "No, no,"

GIRISH CHANDRA GHOSH

corrected the Master, "you must not speak in that dogmatic way. Suppose you fail to do it? Say, God willing, I shall do it." Girish understood that he had given up his freedom and made of himself the Master's captive. Thenceforth he tried to give up all idea of personal responsibility and to become a willing instrument of the Divine Will. The sincerity of Girish in this respect was beyond comparison.

When the Master was removed to the Cossipore garden, once an event of great importance happened. It was the 1st of January, 1886. Sri Ramakrishna felt much better that day and wished to take a walk in the garden. It was about three in the afternoon. As it was a holiday, about thirty lay disciples were present, some in the hall and others under the trees. When Sri Ramakrishna came down, those in the hall saluted him and followed him at a distance as he walked slowly towards the gate. Girish, Ram, Atul and some others, who were chatting under a tree, came and saluted the Master. Sri Ramakrishna suddenly said to Girish, "Well, Girish, what have you found in me that you proclaim me before all as an Incarnation?" Girish, not at all taken aback by the question, knelt before him with folded hands and said in a voice shaken with emotion, "What can an insignificant creature like me say about One whose glory even sages like Vyasa and Valmiki could not measure?" Hearing these words, spoken with the greatest intensity, Sri Ramakrishna was deeply moved and said: "What more shall I say? I bless you

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

all. *Be illumined!*" Saying this he fell into a state of semi-consciousness. He touched them all, one by one, with appropriate blessings. The powerful touch revolutionised their minds and all became mad with joy. Girish and others realised that the Master was showering his grace upon all without distinction.

The illness of the Master gradually increased and he became bed-ridden. Girish one day went to see him. It was the 16th of April. The Master was a little better that day. He inquired about the health of Girish and asked Latu (afterwards Swami Adbhutananda) to bring tobacco, betel and some refreshments for him. A devotee presented the Master with some garlands of flowers which he put on, one by one. Two of these he presented to Girish. When the refreshments were brought before him, he barely tasted them and with his own hands gave the rest to Girish. Girish ate them in his presence. It was summer. The Master said, "There is no good water here." He was too weak to stand, but he wanted to pour water for Girish. He moved, poured some water into a glass and took a little on his palm to feel if it was cool. It was not cool enough, but knowing that none cooler was available, he gave it to Girish. From his bed he began to talk almost in a whisper with Girish and others on various spiritual topics—Girish's faith coming out in bold colours during the conversation. When Girish went to wash his hands, the Master sent word to him that he should not eat anything more that evening. Such incidents disclose how deeply

GIRISH CHANDRA GHOSH

Girish was loved by Sri Ramakrishna. The divine touch of his transcendental love and kindness transformed this rank atheist into a most warm-hearted believer in God and religion.

Indeed, the abiding influence of the Master on Girish's life and thought is the masterkey that unlocks, as it were, the mystery of the deep religious tone that pervades almost all the mature plays of this great dramatist. Anyone who has gone through the literary masterpieces of his later years cannot but find the lofty teachings of his Master mirrored in all their beauty and vividness in them. Rightly a great Bengali writer has remarked: "No other great dramatist of the world lays any special stress upon the sublime religious sentiments of man and his hankering after salvation....This feature distinguishes Girish from all other great dramatists. A living faith in God and ardent love for man glow almost in every page of the famous dramas of Girish. This was undoubtedly due to the blessings of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, which were so liberally bestowed upon him."

After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, Girish, like all the other brother-disciples, both lay and monastic, felt quite forlorn and spent most of his time in their company in all-absorbing talks about their beloved Master. On one occasion Swami Niranjanananda, one of the Sannyasin disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, asked Girish also to embrace the life of a monk; whereupon Girish replied with a little pause: "I can take your words as those of the Master. But I

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

have no freedom to take even to this life, as I have already given him the power of attorney." Sometimes he would feelingly say: "How much easier is it to follow the path of those who believe in the efficacy of self-exertion in religious life! Now I have not the freedom even to breathe." Such was indeed his self-surrender to the Master.

Girish now bethought himself of putting his household affairs in order. But very soon a series of calamities overtook the family. Two daughters born of his second wife passed away and the mother of the girls too just after the birth of a son breathed her last. This premature death of his wife and children weighed too heavily on his mind at this advanced age. His former buoyancy of spirit and bodily vigour were no more; but the one thing that sustained and comforted him in the midst of these repeated calamities and vicissitudes of fortune was his complete resignation to the will of the Lord. He always felt the benign hand of the Master guiding him through thick and thin, and consoled himself by saying, "Let his will be done." Another blow was still in store for him. His little child, who manifested even at a tender age a wonderful love for the name of God, soon died; and thus all attractions for the world were removed through a mysterious combination of circumstances. Shortly after this, Girish lost his lucrative job in the Star Theatre. But Girish was no longer a Bohemian revelling in hedonistic thoughts and wanton excesses. The divine touch of his Master's love had acted on him like a philosopher's stone and brought about a thorough

GIRISH CHANDRA GHOSH

change in his mental outlook and nature. His life now stood firmly grounded on unflinching faith in God, and these catastrophes and calamities that visited him in quick succession could hardly shake him. Though thrown out of employment, he was not in the least perturbed at heart. He devoted himself once more to the study and practice of Homoeopathic medicine to mitigate the suffering of the poor and the helpless. In 1893 he organised the Minerva Theatre, and though his connection with other newly-started theatres was by no means less intimate, he made the Minerva stage the main theatre of his activities and extended to it his liberal patronage till the last day of his life.

In the winter of 1906 Girish began to develop symptoms of asthma, and from that time he became a prey to this ailment with the approach of cold. The stuffy atmosphere of Calcutta was suffocating to him and aggravated his disease. He therefore passed the winters of 1909 and 1910 in Benares and felt greatly improved in health. After his return to Calcutta he once more threw himself heart and soul into his profession, but the unusual strain thus put on his weak nerve undermined his already shattered health. He began to sink rapidly, but his spirit never gave way. His eyes and countenance radiant with a superb glow bespoke his inner illumination and his unswerving faith in the love and grace of his Master. During the last days of his life he used very often to utter the name of Sri Ramakrishna, and said to his brother-disciples: "I do not want anything

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

else; only bless me that I may always remember him as the ocean of infinite love and compassion. The world is no longer a terror unto me. I have transcended all fear of death through his grace." On the night before the day of his final exit from the world, Girish calmly uttered the name of Sri Ramakrishna thrice and prayed, "Lord, let me have peace; let me have peace; take me into thy bosom." So saying, the heroic devotee of Sri Ramakrishna closed his eyes for good and passed into the realm of eternal rest on Thursday, February 8, 1912.

Thus ended the chequered career of Girish who was a poet and a *litterateur*, an actor and a dramatist, a patriot and a saint in one. Everybody who came in contact with his magnetic personality in later years could not resist his great influence. Mrs. Gray Hallock, an English admirer of Girish, who had the privilege of sitting for some time at his feet rightly observed: "Here was a man of whom in his closing years I could feel the manliness and strength, the sweetness and tolerance and devotion of spirit. If you heard rumours of wild youth, it was merely, as you looked at the fine old Roman face, to think how handsome he must have been. What a magnificent lover he must have been—fierce, delicate, poetic, tenderly masterful; assertive, not deliberate, yet humble by the strength of his love. My respect went out to this old man who had something to renounce, whose very strength sent him first to the devil and then, with equal impetus, to God. My reverence went out to him

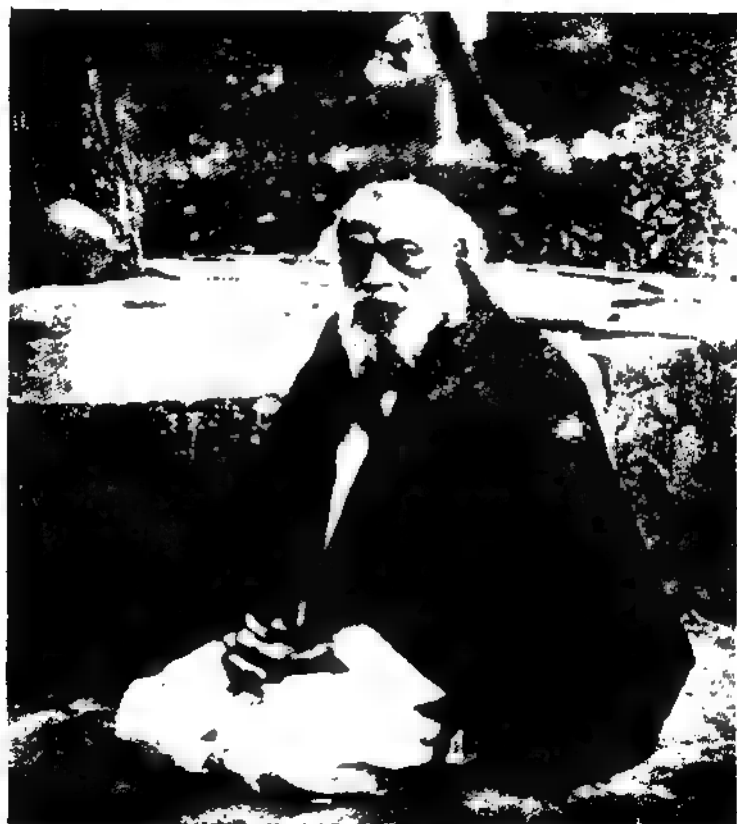
GIRISH CHANDRA GHOSH

at once, as to the saint I had been looking for in a land of saints....Here was one who had genius and fire, who was not half dead nor atrophied, one who had renounced the world, the flesh, and the devil, knowing their charm, and yet lived actively and beneficently in the midst of life; who used his genius for his time and his people, yet knew that fame is bubble and laid his work at the feet of his God. A saint, this who meditated and had realised God—yet had time and compassion enough to help the small troubles of his world, who went to Calcutta slums with righteous indignation and medicines, who scolded and annihilated evil, but loved the sinner and gave spiritual, mental and physical comfort in a brotherly way. A saint, this, with a love of God that does not crowd out God's children; his heart set on God, yet his brain, its servant, inspired to write great dramas and poems." These glowing words of one who was a stranger to Indian life and tradition, clearly demonstrate how penetrating and abiding was the influence of his powerful personality on all who happened to come into intimate touch with him.

Even the great Swami Vivekananda was all praise and respect for Girish because of his sterling qualities of head and heart—his robust optimism, unique devotion and great patriotism. The Swami would very affectionately call him "G. C.," and this was the name by which he was known to many devotees of Sri Ramakrishna. When "G. C." would visit the Belur Math it would create a stir in the monastery—for he was

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

full of the Master, he lived, moved and had his being in him. His frequent visits to the Belur Math were availed of by all monastic members to hear from him with eager attention the soul-enthraling reminiscences of the beloved Master and to catch inspiration from his living faith. But he was all simplicity and humility. His ego was completely effaced, and all his thoughts centred on the Master. Scratch him, however little, and you see the fire of his devotion to the Guru coming forth. How many times in the day would he not raise his hands folded in salutation to and in remembrance of the Master ! He considered himself a tool in the hands of the Guru in all his activities throughout the day. An eye-witness says : "His diploma as a physician was his faith in regarding himself as merely an instrument in the hands of his Master for the relief of suffering. I have seen him take a medicine in his folded hands and offer it in worship and supplication for blessing before giving to the sick." Many were the persons who would come to see him and get inspiration from his wonderful transformation. He was full of fiery encouragement to one and all. The message of the Master spread not a little through him—through his life and example, conversations and writings. Indeed one could see in him the proof beyond doubt of the truth of the Master's vision that Girish came to the world to work for him and to fulfil his divine mission in his humble way.



Mahendra Nath Gupta

III

MAHENDRA NATH GUPTA

When Prophets or founders of religions pass away, they leave their message in the hands of their disciples and followers who become torch-bearers of that to the world. Of the monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, if Swami Vivekananda has done most in the matter of broadcasting his message far and wide, among the lay disciples of the Master, Mahendra Nath Gupta, better known by the pen-name of "M," or as Master Mahashay, ranks first as being the greatest instrument of spreading his teaching to the spiritually hungry world. His *Kathamrita*—notes on conversations with Sri Ramakrishna, through the original in Bengali and translations in various languages, Indian and foreign, has served as veritable ambrosia to innumerable souls thirsting for religion, and it has also become, as it were, an explosive to social life inasmuch as by reading it many have given up the world in quest of Truth. This book alone was sufficient to immortalise him; for as at present so also in future it is bound to be a ceaseless source of inspiration to thousands of persons.

The spoken words of "M" were no less important than this his printed record. He was a vista through which one could get a glimpse into the life of Sri Ramakrishna as it was lived at Dakshineswar in the last few years of his earthly

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

existence. With his imaginative mind and a most tenacious memory "M" always lived, as it were, in the years when he enjoyed the company of the Master, and he could carry into that atmosphere all who would go on a pilgrimage to him to hear about Sri Ramakrishna. Ask any question and he would describe some incident from the life of Sri Ramakrishna in the answer which followed. And that description would be so vivid! One would feel one were in the blessed company of the Master. From day to day "M" thus preached the Master and his message till the cruel hand of death took him away in June, 1932, and he became only a memory, but an inspiring one to those who had had the privilege of meeting him, even though only once.

Mahendra Nath was born on July 14, 1854, in Calcutta. His father Madhusudan Gupta and his mother Swarnamayee Devi were both very pious people. They had four sons and four daughters, of whom Mahendra was the third child. The outstanding impression left on Mahendra Nath by his parents was the piety of his mother to whom he was deeply attached. Once when he was only four years old, he accompanied his mother to witness the Ratha Yatra Festival at Mahesh on the Ganges near Calcutta, and when returning, the party landed at Dakshineswar Ghat to see the temple of Mother Kali, then newly built by Rani Rasmani in 1855. With reference to this Mahendra Nath said: "The temple was all white then, new and fresh. While going round the temple I lost sight of my mother and was crying for her, standing

MAHENDRA NATH GUPTA

on the dais of the temple. Some one then came from inside and caressed me and began to call out, 'Whose child is this? Where has his mother gone?' " The fond imagination of Mahendra Nath would dwell upon the incident and love to think that it was perhaps his Master, whom he had met in early life in this fugitive way. The outstanding piety of his mother so impressed him in early life that Mahendra grew very fond of her, and when his mother died, he felt disconsolate and wept bitterly. Then one night he saw his mother in a dream speaking in a sweet voice, "I have so long protected and looked after you, I shall still continue to look after you, but you will not see me." Master Mahashay, after narrating the incident, would say: "It is the Divine Mother of the universe who in the form of my earthly mother protected me in life. She is still protecting and watching over my life."

The early lineaments of his character bespoke the intense spirituality of his later life. He was from a very early age of a religious turn of mind, and the make-up of his mind was different from the ordinary. He was thus blessed with religious experience which does not fall to the lot of the majority of humanity at an early age.

This religious temperament found expression in an early manifestation of piety. From an early age, whenever passing by a temple, he would bow down before the Deity and stand in awe and reverence. At the time of the Durga Puja, he would sit for long hours near the Image rapt in love and admiration. He was very fond, in early

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

age, of seeking the company of Sadhus who visited Calcutta specially on the occasion of "Yoga" for a holy bath in the Ganges, or Melas, or *en route* to Puri for pilgrimage to Jagannath. Later in life he would say that this habit of seeking the company of Sadhus stood him in good stead and eventually brought him to the feet of the Prince of Sadhus—Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

Mahendra Nath was a bright student. He passed the Entrance Examination from the Hare School and occupied the second place; in the F. A. Examination he stood fifth and graduated from the Presidency College in 1875, standing third in the University. He was a student of Mr. C. H. Tawney, the well-known Professor of English, with whom he kept up correspondence even after the latter's retirement. This professor afterwards wrote a brochure on Sri Ramakrishna.

Towards the end of his college career he married the daughter of Thakur Charan Sen, Srimati Nikunja Devi, who was related as cousin to the well-known religious teacher Keshab Chandra Sen. Nikunja Devi was also blessed with the intimate acquaintance of Sri Ramakrishna and the Holy Mother, and obtained their grace and love.

Entering the householder's life he first served as headmaster of different schools, e.g., the Narail High School, City, Aryan, Model, Metropolitan and Shyambazar Branch schools and the Oriental Seminary. Besides this he served in the City, Ripon and Metropolitan Colleges as Professor of English Literature, Mental and Moral

MAHENDRA NATH GUPTA

Science, History and Political Economy. When he first met Sri Ramakrishna, he was serving as teacher in the Shyambazar Branch School, established by Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar.

Before he met Sri Ramakrishna, the religious teacher whom he frequented and looked up to as his ideal was Keshab Chandra Sen. Keshab was then in the plenitude of his power and popularity and by his sermons, religious discourses and saintly character had won the heart of many Bengali youths like Mahendra Nath. He attended many of Keshab's Upasanas both at his family house and at the Navavidhan Mandir. He used to say that the soul-stirring prayers of Keshab, delivered in such sweet language and voice, with his face bright with the enthusiasm of a prophet, produced a great impression on him, and Keshab appeared to him like a god. He had heard no one speak with such power, and none had stirred his soul so much before. Latterly Mahendra Nath used to say that Keshab's sermons appealed to him perhaps because he was then contacting his Master through Keshab and his light 'was then coming to him reflected through the medium of Keshab Chandra. Keshab had then already made the acquaintance of Sri Ramakrishna and used to visit him in company with his friends and disciples.

It was at this time, in the spring of 1882, that Mahendra Nath first met his Master, Sri Ramakrishna, in the temple-garden of Dakshineswar. Sri Ramakrishna was sitting in his room discoursing on God before a rapt circle of listeners. The

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

first meeting captivated the heart and soul of Mahendra Nath, and he returned home a slave to his love, to revisit him soon. Educated in Western lore, saturated with the thoughts of Western philosophers like Kant, Hegel, Hamilton and Herbert Spencer, he believed in the intellectual sufficiency of modern knowledge. He had a little of its *hauteur* and considered himself a man of learning. But a few hard knocks from the Master were enough to shatter his intellectual pride. He soon placed himself in the position of a learner at the feet of one who had access to the Fountain of all knowledge. Real knowledge is the knowledge of God, the Ultimate Reality; all other knowledge, limited and sense-bound, is only a form of ignorance. This he was never tired of reiterating to his listeners in later life. He would often say: "Intellect has been weighed in the balance and found wanting; intellect, a feeble organon, limited and conditioned by the senses, cannot solve the problem of the Unconditioned and the Unlimited. Revelation is necessary to have a knowledge of the Unconditioned Reality." "And for that," his advice was, "the association of Sadhus who are ever communing with the Infinite and Eternal is required, is the *sine qua non* of religious life. That alone will purify our mind, which will then receive and catch messages from the Beyond, the Unconditioned and Infinite Reality. Without that no amount of intellectual knowledge is of any avail to take us into the region of the Unconditioned."

He found in his Master one to whom knowledge

MAHENDRA NATH GUPTA

was revelation, who was not walking in the dim twilight of finite knowledge, half-light and half-darkness, but who had the direct perception of truths in a supersensuous state (Samadhi). His Master's intense hunger for Truth, his frequent plunges into the depths of superconsciousness, his perception of God as a very near and ever-present Reality, and his rapturous communion with the Divine Mother produced a deep impression on Mahendra Nath, and putting aside all vanities of education he became a rapt listener to the flow of revealed knowledge that fell from the lips of his beloved Master in a state of trance, semi-trance or in the state of outward consciousness. This attitude he maintained to the last. Seeing this attitude his Master once called him to himself and said, "Whatever you hear falling from this mouth, know to be the words of the Mother."

His Master recognised at first sight the spiritual calibre of Mahendra Nath and the unique spiritual material which lay imbedded in his make-up waiting for a spark of the Divine Fire. He was not a little shocked to hear from his mouth, in answer to a query, that he had already bound himself by marital ties and that a son had been born to him; for it was the Master's idea that one must conserve all one's power and not scatter it in worldly pursuits. One should direct the collected and concentrated energy of mind, body and soul Godwards; then only there will be a great development of spirituality. Then he explained to Mahendra Nath: "I can see from the signs of your eyes, brows and face, that you

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

are a Yogi. You look like a Yogi who has just left his seat of meditation."

The Master then began to train him for his work. He began to teach him how to live unattached in the world, and all his instructions to him tended that way. In his first meeting when M. asked the Master how to live in the world, the Master said:

"Do all your work, but keep your mind on God. Wife, children, father and mother, live with all and serve them as if they are your own, but know in your mind that your relation with them is temporary.

"The maid-servant of a rich man's house does all the work of the household but her mind flies to where her native home is in the country. She calls her Master's children hers, and brings them up as such. She calls them 'My Ram, My Hari,' but knows in her mind that they are none of her own.

"The tortoise swims about in the waters of the lake, but her mind is fixed on where her eggs are laid on the bank. So, do all the work of the world, but keep your mind on God.

"After attaining love for God, if you mix in worldly work, you will remain non-attached.

"For that one must retire to solitude occasionally and think of God intensely and exclusively.

"In order to get butter out of milk, one must let the milk settle into curd in a solitary place; then one must, sitting alone, with concentration, churn the curd; then the butter will rise to the

top and that butter will float on the water and not get mixed up with it.

“Similarly if by prayer and meditation in a solitary place one can get the butter of love and knowledge of God in the mind, then the mind even if kept in worldly work, will float on the waters of the world; it will remain non-attached; be in the world, but not of it.”

How difficult it is to practise these things in worldly life, in the midst of wife, children, money and a hundred other worldly distractions, in the storm-centre of life exposed to gusts from all directions—any one who has attempted it knows in his heart of hearts. It becomes easier if one isolates oneself in early life, fixes one’s thoughts first on God and then mixes in the world. Yet Mahendra Nath, through the grace of the Guru, carried it to success, and attained to perfect Yoga in God in the midst of the storm and stress of life. The grace of the Guru made the impossible possible. Anyone who has seen Mahendra Nath in later life will bear testimony to the fact that he lived in the world only in name, that his mind was always in union with God, revelling in His Love and Knowledge. His unbounded joy in the company of Bhaktas and Sadhus, whose association he always sought, the incessant flow of his words while talking of God and things divine in his unwearied discourses on his Master’s life and personality till a late hour of the night, were phenomena to see. In the latter part of his life his Calcutta residence was a place of pilgrimage to many, and some visited it every day.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Whenever you would go, you would find that either he was listening to some devotional scriptures being read and making comments occasionally, or he was talking of his Master and his teachings, throwing on them wonderful sidelights from the life and teachings of Jesus, Chaitanya and Sri Krishna by apposite references to the Bible, Purana, *Bhagavata*, Upanishad, etc. There was no other discussion. If any other things were brought in by some venturesome questioner, they were at once turned skilfully to a religious topic, to the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna: and the whole atmosphere would be changed. No word was heard but the word of God, no word was spoken but the word of God, no word was read but the word of God.

The Master knew that Mahendra Nath was one of his "Officers," destined to preach his word, and he began to train and commission him for the purpose. So we find the Master, in one of his trances, praying one day in July, 1883, to the Mother about Mahendra Nath: "Mother, why have you given him only one Kala of Power? Oh, I see. That will be sufficient for your work?" So as early as that, all these arrangements of commissioning the disciples with power were being made secretly with the Mother so that they would do the work of teaching people in future.

Mahendra Nath was from the beginning inclined to the worship of the formless God and spoke of this to the Master. The Master encouraged him in that worship and gave instructions accordingly.

MAHENDRA NATH GUPTA

One day he took him to a famous artificial lake to teach him how to meditate successfully on the Formless, like a fish moving about in joy unobstructed in a large sheet of water. But he advised him to give up all sectarian and narrow outlook, and not to look upon other modes of worship as wrong. Then gradually he taught him the worship of God with forms (Sakara). So we find him teaching: "Recognise the worship of God with forms. He appears before the devotees in forms carved out of Consciousness." He was thus broadening the base of his spiritual life.

The Master led M. gradually from one aspect of Divinity to another and gave him the tastes and visions of God desired by heavenly beings.

The Master would ask his newly-come disciples, by way of testing their power of spiritual appreciation and openness to spiritual truths, "What do you think of me?" And if any one at an early period recognised him to be an Incarnation, the Master thought he had great spiritual possibilities. Accordingly on the third day of his meeting, he asked M., "What do you think of me, how many annas of knowledge have I?" M. answered, "Annas, I cannot say, but such love, knowledge, dispassion and catholicity, I have not seen elsewhere." The Master began to laugh. Some time afterwards he again asked M. about himself. M. answered, "The Lord has created you Himself with His own hands (self-created), and other beings with a machine." Some time later, M. gives his own estimate of the Master, "The power of the Lord has been embodied in you." "What

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

is the measure of that power?" "Measure, I cannot say, but that His power has become incarnate is clear." Some time afterwards M. made an open avowal and said, "I think Jesus Christ, Chaitanya and yourself are one and the same."

When the Master in explaining the theory of Incarnation compared the Incarnation to a big aperture in the wall through which the Infinite Expanse of the Unconditioned Existence is seen, M. answered, "You are the opening through which the Unknown is seen."

The Master with great satisfaction patted him on the back and said: "You have understood that at last. It is excellent." That very evening when M. avowed his liking for the Formless, the Master said, "I also would not see forms of God before, now also it is diminishing (vision of form)." Then M. said, "Of forms the manifestation of God in human form appeals to me." "That is sufficient and you are seeing ME," was the reply. The perception of the Divine incarnate in Sri Ramakrishna was the last word in the Sadhana of Mahendra Nath. After that he knew nothing besides Sri Ramakrishna; his whole mind and soul centred round him—to meet him, to serve him and to hear his words were his all-absorbing passion. His allegiance and loyalty to his Master was phenomenal. Never for a moment did he waver in his love and devotion to him and never did his interest flag. His pleasure in his company knew no satiety.

The estimate of the Master about M. was high. The Master would narrate how, in one of his

trances, he had seen him in the circle of Sri Chaitanya's disciples. The face seen in the vision had been imprinted on his mind; therefore when he saw M. he recognised him at once. Again we find the Master saying: "I have recognised you, hearing you read the *Chaitanya Bhagavata*: you are of the same essence as I am, as father and son. So long as you did not come here, you remained self-forgotten. Now you will know yourself. Now go and live in the world unattached." Then the Master prayed to the Mother: "Do not make him give up everything. Do in the end what You will. If You keep him in the world, show Yourself to him now and then. Otherwise, how will he remain in the worldly life, where will he find the zest for living?"

When Mahendra Nath one day expressed his desire to give up all for the sake of God, the Master said: "You are well established in God already. Is it good to give up all? The Lord keeps the speaker or preacher of the Word in the world, otherwise who will speak the word of God to people? That is why the Mother has kept you in worldly life?"

The great non-attachment for worldly things and the intense love for God that were seen in Mahendra Nath were the result of lifelong struggle. The spiritual practices which he began at the feet of his Master he continued in later life. He regularly visited the Baranagore Math established by the group of monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna headed by Swami Vivekananda, and invariably spent the week-ends there. There was

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

at that time a fever of excitement for spiritual practices and for the realisation of God in the Baranagore Math. Mahendra Nath would warm himself in that benignant flame. He was never tired of narrating the life lived by these apostles and of their great longing for God manifested at this period. When some lay disciples of Sri Ramakrishna brushed the monastic disciples aside as a few unripe, inexperienced youths, Mahendra helped the latter to rally together. Swami Vivekananda writes in one of his letters to the Math from America : " When Ramakrishna left his body everybody gave us up as a few unripe urchins; but M. and a few others did not leave us in the lurch. We cannot repay our debt to them." M. used to say to us that the life and atmosphere of the Baranagore Math appeared to him to be so holy that he would sprinkle over his body the water gathered in a cistern there, with an idea of purifying himself thereby. Sometimes at the Baranagore Math, sometimes at Dakshineswar temple-garden, he would retire into solitude and spend long days in spiritual practices. When he would get leave for a longer period, he would sometimes retire to some neighbouring garden and there live alone, himself cooking his simple meal and thinking of God. While at home also, he would sometimes get up at night, carry his bedding to the open verandah of the Senate Hall of the Calcutta University, and there sleep among the waifs of the city in order to feel that he was homeless. When questioned why he went to such extent, he said, " The idea of home and

family clings to one and does not leave easily." During the hours of his work at college as a professor, whenever he would get a little leisure or interval he would retire into a solitary room on the roof and there open his diary of the Master, pore over it, read, think and digest it. Latterly, when he had become the proprietor of a school, as soon as his work of supervision was over he would retire to his private room, shut the door, and live by himself. All these are to recount only a few among many of his habits. Is it a wonder that with his talents and such intense living in God, he was able to live in the world unattached, filled through and through with the thought and presence of God?

It is at this time that young men from local colleges gathered round to hear him speak on God and his Master's life and teachings. It is his burning words of renunciation and intense love of God that first roused the fire of spirituality in many young men who afterwards became completely dispassionate to worldly life and dedicated themselves to God and His worship. Even during the lifetime of Sri Ramakrishna he brought some of his students to his feet, and they afterwards became great personalities in the circle of the Master's disciples. So he was called by the familiar name of Master Mahashay.

Thus living and moving in the atmosphere of his Master's life and personality and the associations of his brother-disciples for more than a decade, he felt inclined to bring out the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, the book which will

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

immortalise his name. The genesis of how the diary of conversations with Sri Ramakrishna came to be recorded, he narrated thus: "I was in worldly life, bound to my work and could not visit the Master whenever I wished; so I used to note his words and impressions in order to be able to think on them in the intervals before I met him again, so that the impressions made on my mind might not be overlaid by the stress of worldly work and preoccupation. It was thus for my own benefit and good that I first made the notes, so that I might realise his teachings more perfectly."

The *Gospel* first appeared in 1897 in English in a pamphlet form. It drew immediate praise and encouragement from Swami Vivekananda. The dramatic setting, the vivid impression given of the Master, the description on every occasion of the framework and the atmosphere, all contrived to produce a wonderful effect. One felt transported to the period of the Master's living, to be sitting by him and listening to his talk. The *dramatis personae* seemed to be moving and living figures, and the spiritual aroma of these lovely scenes and holy conversations filled one's heart with a divine fragrance. Swami Vivekananda was all praise for the book. He wrote: "I am in a transport when I read it. The dramatic part is infinitely beautiful. The language is fresh and pointed and withal easy. I now understand why none of us attempted his life before. It has been reserved for you—this great work." Indeed it is the poetic temperament of Mahendra Nath, his sensitive, impressionable nature, his long dwelling upon these scenes with

MAHENDRA NATH GUPTA

infinite love and reverence which helped him to recall those scenes with the vividness and the force of life to make his Master and the disciples live in literature as immortals.

In 1905 he retired from his work as guardian tutor and purchased the Morton Institution, then situated in Jhamapukur Lane. The school remained in these premises for many years, and when the number of students increased, he transferred it to 50, Amherst Street. At both these places he remained by himself in a solitary room in the school building, much sought after by devotees from far and near. In the mornings and evenings he would be surrounded by a circle of listeners and would continue to talk of religious topics, mainly on the life and teachings of his Master.

After his Master's passing away Mahendra Nath visited Benares, Vrindavan, Ayodhya and other holy places. At Benares he saw the famous Trailanga Swami whom he fed with sweets, and also Swami Bhaskarananda with whom he had a long talk. In the year 1912, he went on a pilgrimage with the Holy Mother to Benares and spent eleven months in Benares, Hardwar, Kankhal, Rishikesh and Vrindavan in the company of Sadhus. After some time the idea of seeing the places associated with his Master so powerfully drew his mind that he abandoned the project of staying in those parts longer and returned to Calcutta.

Mahendra Nath had a wonderful capacity for idealising things, for sublimating things human

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

into divine. Everything, to his eyes, was coloured with the tints of Divinity; nothing was small or commonplace to him. This trait he got from his Master who possessed it in an abundant degree. He had first visited the birthplace of his Master at Kamarpukur while the Master was living at Cossipore. Everything there seemed to him appavelled in glory. The road, the temples, the way-side villages, the peasants, the neighbours, even the road-side dust appeared meaningful to him, and he saw them with a different eye. All places where his Master went and lived in his boyhood or afterwards, he visited and lovingly touched, and he bowed before them all. When he returned from his peregrinations and narrated them to his Master, he asked, "How could you go into such out-of-the-way places, infested by robbers?" And when he learned how M. had carefully visited the places and scenes of his childhood, he was almost in tears at the manifestation of his love, and said to a person near by: "Look at his love, nobody has told him and he out of his own accord with infinite care and love has gone to those places. His love is like that of Vibhishana, who, when he found a human form, at once dressed it in rich apparel and worshipped it by waving lights, saying, 'This is the form of my Ramachandra.'" Anyone who saw how reverently he stood before Prasad (sacramental food of any deity) and took that in his hand and put it on his head, how he would worship any memento of any holy place like Dakshineswar or the Belur Math and keep that long

before him and lovingly look at that day after day, how, whenever any word of God was being read, he would sit up reverently, leaving aside his slippers, would realise the infinite ocean of love and reverence that lay at the bottom of his heart and manifested itself in these forms. If the idea of seeing Brahman in everything is the last word of Sadhana, then the ideal can be realised only by such reverential attitude; Brahman is seen in everything only through such loving eyes.

His great love for Sadhus and Bhaktas was phenomenal. He would idealise Sadhus and their life above all and could not bear to class them in the same category with householders. The Sadhus who are trying to devote their whole time and energy to God, without giving their energy to anything else, he would consider as the ideal of life. If the realisation of God is the end of life, then that realisation is possible only to those who give their all to God—who, leaving all other pre-occupations, with single-minded devotion, wait upon God for a spark of the Divine Fire which will set their hearts aflame with Divine Love. Householders, even if they are devotees, have a thousand distractions, a hundred necessary setbacks which put a limit to their allegiance to God. They cannot be compared with those who have set their whole mind and face towards Him—that is what he would say. He would say again that all the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna tended towards renunciation; even in his teachings to householders he sowed the seeds which would ultimately sprout up in the form of renunciation

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

either in this life or another. Thus he would idealise Sadhus—whole-time men, as he would call them—and set them apart in a category by themselves and would resent the least slight shown to them or their life, and would always preach the glory of association with holy men—the only practical means of spiritual realisation. When a Sadhu would come, he would sit near him for hours forgetting everything and say: “A Sadhu has come, the Lord Himself has come in one form, as it were, shall I not postpone my eating and bath for him? Absurdity can go no further if I cannot do that.” He would love to feed the Sadhus and sit by them and watch and say, “I am offering food to the Lord, I am taking part in and seeing a Puja.” He would paint in brilliant colours the life of the Sadhu, his great ideal and mission of life, his great sacrifice for the highest end, and would show infinite regret if any Sannyasin neglected his rare opportunity of realising the *summum bonum* of life. Sadhus learnt from him the glory of their mission.

His humility was very touching. A great spiritual personality with a face beaming with the light of heaven, having made acquaintance and enjoyed intimacy with such great souls as Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Keshab Chandra Sen, Swami Vivekananda, Ishwar Chandra Vidya-sagar and many others, he acted and behaved as if he was nothing, as if he was an insignificant person. His Master told him to live like a servant in this life, and he literally carried it out. He considered himself the servant of all. He would be

MAHENDRA NATH GUPTA

infinitely pained if anyone advanced to render him any little service, and he would go forward enthusiastically to serve all. Although teaching and speaking for more than forty years of his life about God and religion to generations of young men, he never assumed the rôle of a teacher. He taught indirectly, and his words would pierce the most adamant heart and work wonders. He never ordered any one to do or not to do anything while guiding the persons who had come under his spiritual influence. He never used compulsion or rebuke. His was a commission of love and yet his soft and sweet words would pierce the stoniest of hearts, make the worldly-minded weep and repent and turn Godwards. He would in his talks hammer and hammer on the truths till they were engraven on the minds of the hearers and they were converted.

His great love for all, like that of a fond mother towards her children, was very striking and spontaneous. Yet he had wonderful control over his feelings. Devotees were to him the life of his life. He would say that devotees made his life bearable; without them life would be a desert; that in the great darkness of the world, the devotees of God were the only shining lights. He would find infinite pleasure in their company.

His temper was phenomenally calm and unruffled. Rarely did one find him to use a harsh word. The calm placidity of his mind remained undisturbed even in most provoking circumstances. Even when suffering from the most excruciating pains in fits of attacks of nerve-spasms, he was

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

kind and loving to the devotees as ever, and anxious for their service. He attained to the state of perfect conquest of the flesh.

The abstemiousness and the extreme simplicity of his life struck his visitors forcibly. Although able to live more lavishly, he limited himself to the strictest frugality. In food and dress and external surroundings he was very simple. He would say that one of the great teachings of the Master was the simplification of life; otherwise the paraphernalia of life would increase, engross the mind and completely smother the spirit leaving no time for thinking about God. Thus living in simple, almost tattered garments, on food simple to bareness, in surroundings the most common-place, he lived a life of absorption in God, and was an example of high thinking and plain living. Living this simple life and being merged in God, he was a blessing to innumerable souls and a hope and stay to many a lost wanderer of this planet.

WOMEN DISCIPLES



Gopal's Mother

I

GOPAL'S MOTHER

" And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me."—*Matthew*.

Those who have read Sister Nivedita's masterpiece *The Master as I Saw Him* are very familiar with the name of "Gopaler Ma." In that fervent style peculiar to herself, the Sister says: "Gopal's mother was an old woman. She had already been old, fifteen or twenty years before, when she had first walked over, one day at noon, from her cell at Kamarhatty, by the Ganges-side to see the Master in the garden at Dakshineswar. He received her, so they say, standing at his door, as if he expected her. And she, whose chosen worship had been for many years Gopala, the Babe Krishna, the Christ-child of Hinduism, saw him revealed to her, as in a vision, as she drew near. How true she always was to this! Never once through all the years that followed, did she offer salutation to Sri Ramakrishna, who took her thenceforth as his mother. And never have I known her to speak of our Holy Mother, save as 'My daughter-in-law.' "

Sri Ramakrishna used to say: "First obtain Bhakti and all other things shall be added unto you. Devotion is like a string in the hands of the devotee, binding to him that Sachchidananda which is God. The devotee holds the Lord, so to

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

“speak, under his control.” But how can love or Bhakti grow between man and God? It grows when there is some mutual relation between them. Hence, the scriptures which deal with Bhakti Yoga speak of various relations a person can have with his God.

In Christianity, as preached and practised by the present-day Missionaries, only the Fatherhood of God is accepted. They say that they are related to God as a son is to his father; the devotee must love God as his own father. But in the Vaishnava philosophy we find the highest development of this idea of relationship with God. According to it there are five types of love and relation to God:—Shanta, Dasya, Sakhya, Vatsalya and Madhura. The Shanta Bhakti is calm, peaceful and gentle. The fire and the madness of love have not yet grown. The Dasya Bhakta thinks himself the servant of the Lord. Examples are not wanting of Dasya Bhaktas. It is very common in all countries and in all religions. But the other three kinds of Bhaktas are peculiar to India and particularly to the Vaishnava philosophy. Sakhya is loving Him as our beloved friend, i.e., the love of Arjuna to Sri Krishna. Vatsalya is loving God not as our father but as our child. There is one more representation of the divine ideal of love which is known as Madhura—sweet. It is based on the highest manifestation of love in this world, and this love is also the strongest known to man. It is the love of the wife for the husband. The Gopis of Vrindavan are the highest examples of this love.

GOPAL'S MOTHER

Of all these types the Vatsalya Bhava or loving God as one's child looks very peculiar. But this is a discipline to enable one to detach all ideas of power from the concept of God. To conceive God as mighty, glorious and as the Lord of the Universe, this lover does not care. He loves for love's sake. He does not want anything in return and so any powers of God do not concern him at all. He cannot ask any favour from Him as he does not ask any from his child. It is to root out the superstitions of awe and fear in relation to God that this idea seems to have been developed in India. Those who are acquainted with the life of Sri Ramakrishna know well his relation to the image Ramlala or the Babe Ram. How he used to love the image as his own child, nay, the Lord, the Incarnation Ramchandra, as his own son! Gopaler Ma belonged to this type of Bhaktas. She used to worship or, it would be better to say, love the Lord as her own child.

The Gita says that one in a thousand strives for the realisation of God and of those who strive only a fortunate few actually realise God. Many worship God only as an abstract conception but only a very very few persons realise Him as a fact. One may worship God as Father, one may look upon Him as a Babe, or as any other human relation, but how few are those who actually realise Him as tangibly as those earthly representations of human love! Fortunately for the world such persons may be rare, but not altogether absent. In every religion we hear of persons who have had visions of the forms of

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

God. To some these visions have come quite unexpected—unsought for. St. Teresa saw the vision of Christ even before she began to love the Son of Man. To modern minds the experience of these visions may sound abnormal, but it cannot be altogether denied that there have been persons who have seen genuine visions of God. Of course there are genuine and spurious visions. When one sees a genuine vision of God, one's whole life is completely metamorphosed; the peace and joy which one then radiates silences even doubting critics. When Swami Vivekananda (then Narendra Nath) challenged the visions Sri Ramakrishna saw, as hallucinations, the latter very naively and touchingly said: "How can I doubt the visions? The Divine Mother even talks to me." The Divine Mother was as hard a reality to him as the material objects are to us. To saints God's forms are not allegorical, they are real.

The fact is, after sufficient spiritual practices when one's mind is purified, one lives in a different plane of existence. What one then sees will naturally be different from the experiences of ordinary life. This is greatly exemplified in the life of Gopaler Ma. When one hears of her spiritual experiences, one wonders whether hers was not an abnormal case. But those who would come in personal contact with her would get ■ rare spiritual uplift and so would bow down their head in reverence to her.

Gopal's mother, or Aghoremani Devi as she was then called, was married very young. But she lost her husband soon after her marriage;

GOPAL'S MOTHER

so she used to live in her brother's house. Her brother Nilmadhav Mukhopadhyaya, was regarded highly by the people of his village Kamarhatty, near Dakshineswar. He was the priest of one Govinda Chandra Dutt who had a temple-house by the side of the Ganges. But Govinda Chandra did not live long in this mortal life. His widowed wife was a devout lady with whom Aghoremani made great friends, so she wanted to live most of her time in their temple-house. Her friend readily agreed to this, and henceforth Aghoremani began to live in the temple-garden of Govinda Babu by the side of the Ganges. The room in which Gopaler Ma used to live within this temple-garden at Kamarhatty was nicely situated. The surroundings were all calm and quiet, and it commanded a beautiful sight of the holy Ganges. Aghoremani would sit in her room alone and enjoy the grand view it presented. She was a great Jâpaka and would repeat day and night the holy name of her Ishta, the Chosen Ideal. She did not care to meet people and had lived in that room occupied with her meditation, Japa and holy communion with the Lord for thirty long years when she met Sri Ramakrishna for the first time.

Dakshineswar was only two or three miles from Kamarhatty where Gopaler Ma lived. Sri Ramakrishna's fame had then spread far and near, and Aghoremani had heard that Sri Ramakrishna was living at Dakshineswar. So without losing any more time she went one day with the widow of Govinda Babu to see the saint at Dakshineswar.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

It was in the year 1884 and in the beginning of the winter season. They went on a boat from Kamarhatty and soon reached the garden-house at Dakshineswar. Sri Ramakrishna received them very kindly, as if they were known to him before this meeting. He took them to his own room and said that Bhakti, or the love of God, was the only thing to be attained in this life, and sang some devotional songs to them. They then took leave of him for that day, and Sri Ramakrishna in his usual way did not forget to request them to come again. They also requested him to come to their temple-house once when he could find the opportunity. Sri Ramakrishna spoke very highly of Gopal's mother that day—of her great devotion and love for Gopal or the Baby Krishna.

From the day of her first meeting Aghoremani felt an unusual attraction for Sri Ramakrishna though she could not imagine at the time that they were eternally associated in spiritual affinity and that her Gopal was embodied in Sri Ramakrishna. However, she went home and passed her days in Tapasya as usual. But many days had not passed when one day she sat in her meditation and a strong, irresistible longing came into her mind to see the saint of Dakshineswar. She could not keep herself from going to see the God-intoxicated man. So she at once got up, bought some stale sweets (for they were the only ones then to be found in the market) for him and went alone to see him at Dakshineswar. As soon as Sri Ramakrishna saw her coming, he said: "Well, you have come! Give me what you have

GOPAL'S MOTHER

brought for me." Gopal's mother could not make out what to do ! How to put before him those bad sweets ? How many people offer him so many good things every day ! And what kind of saint was he that as soon as she reached there wanted something to eat from her ? However, with great hesitation Aghoremani gave him those sweets and he also took them at once and began to eat with joy like a child.

In the presence of Aghoremani Sri Ramakrishna was just like a child and began to behave exactly as a little boy does before his mother—pestering her with indulgent demands for this and that. He told her that he wanted to eat vegetable curry cooked by her own hand. Gopal's mother thought, what kind of a saint was this who instead of talking about God talks only of food ! She was a poor lady, so how could she provide him with food so often ? No, she must not come to see this man again ! But what an unearthly attraction was this to lead her soul captive ? As soon as she crossed the gate of the garden of Dakshineswar, her feet would not allow her to move farther homewards ! However, after some struggle, she was able to return to Kamar-hatty that day. But again many days did not pass before she had to return to Dakshineswar with a bowl of prepared vegetable curry in her hand. And Sri Ramakrishna also as before begged of her that food at once and partook of it with evident joy.

A few months passed in this way ; Aghoremani had to go to Dakshineswar every now and then

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

and every time she would go with some food for Sri Ramakrishna. And Sri Ramakrishna would always request her to bring different kinds of vegetable curry prepared by herself. At last one day Gopal's mother really felt disgusted at his conduct and thought: "O Gopal, what is this? Is it because I always think of you that you compel me to come this way to a Sadhu who always wants only to eat? No, I must not come to him any more!" But again the same irresistible and undefinable attraction worked. As soon as she was away from him, her mind would be filled by the thought of the saint and the thought of going to him again.

In the meantime Sri Ramakrishna also went once to see the temple at Kamarhatty where Aghoremani lived. He sang devotional songs before the image in the temple and took his food there and came back to Dakshineswar. At the time of singing those songs everyone present there was astonished and charmed at his strange way of falling into a trance, or Samadhi as it is called.

Aghoremani used to get up at two in the morning and continue telling her beads till eight or nine. Then she would rise up and work in the temple. Afterwards she cooked food for the Lord and took the sacramental food. Then again after resting a while she would sit to meditate till evening. In the evening she would attend the worship in the temple and then sit in Japa till late at night.

Now on one such day she began to tell her beads as usual in the morning, and before she

had finished it, to her utter astonishment it appeared to her as if she found Sri Ramakrishna, sitting by her left side. She saw him as vivid and lifelike as she used to see him at Dakshineswar, and could not understand how it was possible for him to come there at such a time. She was astonished to find Sri Ramakrishna smiling at her. She then mustered courage in her heart, but as soon as she seemed to take hold of his hand, the form of Sri Ramakrishna vanished and a really small babe, about ten months old, seemed to come out of his body. That like Gopal then seemed to crawl on his hands and knees, and lifting one hand and looking at her said, "Mother, give me cheese." The state of Aghoremani's mind at that time could be better imagined than described. She seemed to have lost all her bearings in life and replied crying, "O my dear child, I am a poor, unfortunate woman; where shall I get cheese or butter for you?" But that strange Gopal would not listen to all this. He entreated some food from his mother. What could she do but take out some dry sweets she had in her store and offer them? The child then became satisfied.

She now wanted to sit again in Japa, but her Gopal would not allow it. He must sit on her lap, and would snatch away the beads and play with her. As soon as the morning had dawned, Aghoremani rose up and madly ran towards Dakshineswar, and Gopal also got up in her arms and accompanied her. Throughout the entire way she found the rosy feet of Gopal hanging on her breast, so strange is the play of God with His

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

devotees! Aghoremani reached the temple of Dakshineswar and before she had met Sri Ramakrishna, she cried aloud "Gopal, Gopal." And Sri Ramakrishna also fell into deep Samadhi when she reached him, and was for the while as a babe resting on her lap. Tears of love began to flow from her eyes and she fed Sri Ramakrishna with the cheese and the butter she had brought with her. After a while he came back to his senses and took his own seat. But Aghoremani did not return to the ordinary plane of consciousness. She was beside herself with joy and danced like a mad woman. She was seeing her Gopal sometimes entering into the body of Sri Ramakrishna and again coming out of his body, sitting on her lap and playing with her. She was talking to Sri Ramakrishna: "Here is Gopal on my lap! Oh, he is now entering into your body. Ah, again he is coming out! O my dear Gopal, do come to your poor mother!" In this way she was going on when Sri Ramakrishna gradually pacified her. From that day on Sri Ramakrishna would address Aghoremani as "Gopaler Ma" (Gopal's Mother), and she also would look upon him as her Gopal (Babe Krishna) and call him as such.

That whole day she stayed at Dakshineswar with Sri Ramakrishna, and just before evening she went away to her own place. Also while returning, on her way she had the distinct vision of Gopal resting in her arms. In the evening again, when she sat down to meditate as usual, Gopal began to disturb her. And what was the

GOPAL'S MOTHER

need of any more meditation? For He for whom it was all done was revealed before her and playing with her. Aghoremani at last got up from meditation and laid herself down on her bed with Gopal. But Gopal began to complain of the hard bed, and as there was no second pillow for the head he would not sleep. Gopal's mother pacified the child, saying that the very next morning she would send for a soft pillow from Calcutta. The next morning when she went to cook for her Gopal, the child also followed her, and began to gambol about her in many ways.

Aghoremani had this constant vision of her Child Krishna continually for two months. She actually lived, moved and had her being twenty-four hours of the day in the Baby Krishna. Such God-vision only the blessed few may have! Her devotion for Gopal had become so much intensified that God really took the form of Gopal and lived and played with her. After these two months she could not always see Gopal before her, but whenever she liked to see Him she would meditate a little and He would appear before her.

Once she told Sri Ramakrishna in great distress that she did not see Gopal constantly as before and asked him whether it indicated spiritual retrogression. At this the Master replied, "If one sees God-vision constantly that way, one's body does not last long: it falls away like a withered leaf in twenty-one days." Really after her first experience of God-vision for two long months she lived in a continuous ecstatic mood, her daily duties she would do like a lifeless machine.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

One day both Gopal's mother and Narendra Nath came to Dakshineswar. Gopal's mother was an uneducated, unsophisticated woman and had experiences of God-visions. Narendra Nath was an educated, modern young man and being still under the influence of Brahmo Samaj believed in God without forms. They met together before Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna with his keen sense of humour did not lose this opportunity to enjoy some fun. He asked Gopal's mother to narrate her experience of visions to Narendra Nath. At first she hesitated, but on the express wish of the Master she agreed. Then she began to narrate all her experiences of the vision of Babe Krishna to Narendra Nath. As she narrated, she asked Narendra Nath now and then in guileless simplicity: "You are educated, clever, and intelligent; I am a poor old woman, I know nothing. Please tell me if these visions of mine are true!" With all his rational outlook Narendra Nath had a very soft devotional heart. He assured her that her experiences were true, and his eyes were wet with tears from feelings of devotion.

After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, Gopal's mother became very disconsolate and miserable. She would not come out of her room for many days, and only when she began to get visions of Sri Ramakrishna every now and then did she become reconciled. Whenever she was again a little unhappy she used to go to the monastery to see the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, and she would sometimes live there with them.

GOPAL'S MOTHER

Once Gopal's mother went to see the Car Festival at a place called Mahesh on the other side of the Ganges. There she had a strange experience. As the car was being drawn she saw the vision of Gopal in all that was before her—in the vast concourse of people, the car, and in the Deity on the car. Thus she experienced the all-pervasiveness of God and was lost in an ecstasy of joy.

When Swami Vivekananda returned from the West, his Western disciples—Mrs. Sara C. Bull, Miss J. Macleod and Sister Nivedita accompanied him to India. They once went to see Gopal's mother at Kamarhatty. There she received them very kindly for she saw her Gopal in them. She made them sit on her own mat and served them with pure Indian titbits. She softly touched their chin and kissed them in the Indian matronly fashion, and being asked about her visions related many things to them. Sister Nivedita thus describes this visit: "There, a few of us went, one full-moon night, to visit her. How beautiful was the Ganges, as the little boat crept on and on! And how beautiful seemed the long flight of steps rising out of the water and leading up, through its lofty bathing ghat,....to....where in a little room—built probably in the first place for some servant of the great house at its side—Gopaler Ma had lived and told her beads, for many a year. . . . Her bed was of stone, and her floor of stone, and the piece of matting she offered her guests to sit on, had to be taken down from a shelf and unrolled. The handful of parched rice and sugar candy that formed her only

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

store and were all that she could give in hospitality were taken from an earthen pot that hung from the roof by a few cords....On those beads, Gopaler Ma had become a saint! Hour after hour, day after day, for how many years had she sat, day and night, absorbed in them!" When Swami Vivekananda heard of their visit, he said, "Ah, this is the *old* India that you have seen, the India of prayers and tears, of vigils and fasts, that is passing away, never to return!"

And really did she represent old India! For, in India alone even a child knows that God has to be realised in this life and one can have His vision face to face. And Gopaler Ma, a widow already when she was very young, quite ignorant of the ways of the world, had given up all material enjoyments and devoted her life to the service and realisation of God. How strange and wonderful were her realisation and visions of the Lord! In this age of scepticism she was indeed a pillar of light to us!

Born in the early nineteenth century in a Brahmin family and being a widow early in life, Gopaler Ma was extremely orthodox in her conduct. In the beginning she would not eat food touched even by Sri Ramakrishna. But as she began to frequent Dakshineswar, her rigidity began to relax. So great was her transformation afterwards that she was liberal enough not to object to having a foreigner—Sister Nivedita—in the house when she lived at the Holy Mother's place.

In the year 1904 Gopal's mother fell seriously

GOPAL'S MOTHER

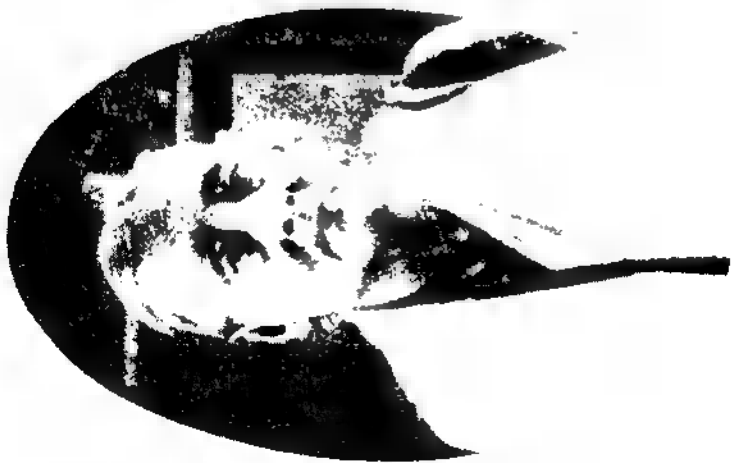
ill, and she had to be brought to Calcutta to Balaram Babu's house at Baghbazar. Sister Nivedita was so much charmed by her life that she expressed her eager intention to nurse her. Gopal's mother had no objection to it, for she had realised that her Gopal was in the heart of everybody. So from that time Gopaler Ma lived in the house of Sister Nivedita. In the month of July in 1906, when the time of her passing away from this mortal life came, she was carried to the Ganges and the Sister decorated her body with flowers and garlands. She lived by the side of the Ganges for two more days and then passed away from mortal sight on July 8, at the age of about ninety.

II

JOGIN MA

With reference to Jogin Ma Sri Ramakrishna once remarked that she was not an ordinary bud blossoming quickly, but rather the bud of a thousand-petalled lotus opening slowly. As time rolled on these prophetic words became literally true. Indeed Jogin Ma's life was really a type of the ancient Indian womanhood, rich with profound spiritual experiences.

The early name of Jogin Ma was Jogindra Mohini Mitra. She was born on January 16, 1851, in North Calcutta, from where came many devotees and disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Her father, Dr. Prasanna Kumar Mitra, was a rich and influential man. She was given away in marriage while very young to a well-known rich zemindar family of Khardah, a place near Calcutta. Her husband was the late Ambika Charan Vishwas, one of whose ancestors was the celebrated Prankrishna Vishwas who compiled the famous treatise on Tantra, called the *Pranatoshini Tantra*. The hope of her parents to see their daughter happy being married into a rich, aristocratic family was dashed to pieces. The marriage proved most unhappy. The young husband became addicted to drink, squandered away everything and became literally a street-beggar. Jogin Ma became disgusted with the



Jogin Ma



Golap Ma (P. 464)

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

—said he and began to console me by relating to me the experiences of his Tantrika Sadhana. After about a year and a half when the Holy Mother returned, he told her, 'The girl with nice, big eyes, who comes here every now and then, loves you much. She wept a lot at the Nahabat on the day of your departure.' The Holy Mother replied, 'Yes, I know her quite well, her name is Jogin.'"

Pleased with the devotion of Jogin Ma, one day the Master, on one of his visits to Calcutta, went also to her house at Baghbazar, and she had the blessed privilege of entertaining him. She also had the good fortune of having many spiritual talks with the Master, and later supplied materials to Swami Saradananda for his important biography of Sri Ramakrishna. Addressing Jogin Ma, Sri Ramakrishna once said: "What more is left to be attained by you? You have seen, fed and served this body (referring to himself)."

During the last illness of the Master Jogin Ma was at Vrindavan, and immediately after his passing away the Holy Mother also joined her there. "The moment the Holy Mother saw me," said Jogin Ma, "she embraced me and being overwhelmed with grief began to shed profuse tears. While at Vrindavan both of us passed the day mostly in wailing and lamentations. One day the Master appeared to us in a vision and said, 'Well, why do you lament so much? Here I am, where can I go? It is just like passing from this room to that.'"

During this period Jogin Ma used to have great

concentration at the time of her meditation. One evening while thus meditating at Lala Babu's temple, she became so much absorbed that she fell into deep Samadhi. Long after the evening service of the temple was over she was still found sitting quiet. The temple attendants about to close the outer gate noticed her in that state and tried to bring her to normal consciousness. The Holy Mother, finding her so late in returning, sent her attendant with a lantern in search of her. He went to the above temple, that being the usual place for Jogin Ma's spiritual practices, and found her lost to all outward consciousness. She gradually came down from that exalted state and returned to her place of residence. Latterly, she would incidentally refer to this period of her life and say, "I was then in such a high spiritual mood that I even forgot whether the world existed or not."

In her Calcutta residence, too, she once experienced this bliss of Samadhi. With reference to this Swami Vivekananda (who was alive at that time) remarked to her: "Jogin Ma, you will pass away in Samadhi. One who gets Samadhi once in life, gets back the memory of that at the time of death."

On another occasion, in connection with her spiritual experiences, she said: "Once I was at such a high spiritual altitude that wherever I turned my eyes, I would see my Ishta. That state lasted for three days." Jogin Ma had two images of the Boy Gopal which she used to serve and worship with so much love and care that she

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

would see them in trance. "One day," she said, "while meditating at the time of the worship, I saw two incomparably handsome boys. They came smiling and hugging me closely and stroking me on my back said, 'Do you know who we are?' I replied, 'Yes, I know you quite well, you are the heroic Balaram, and you, Sri Krishna.' The younger one (Sri Krishna) rejoined, 'You won't remember us.' 'Why?' said I. 'No, you won't, on account of them'—he answered and pointed to my grandsons." Really after the death of her only daughter Jogin Ma was much taken up with her grandsons, and the high spiritual tension at which she had been abated to some extent and became gradually normal.

Though Jogin Ma apparently lived like a householder, she had been initiated into Sannyasa both according to Tantrika and Vedic rites. She performed the Panchatapa ceremony—a very hard form of spiritual practice in which the aspirant sits at meditation with fire on four sides and the burning sun overhead. Her whole life was full of fasts and vigils. In the matter of formal rites and worship she had such single-minded devotion and such application that it was rare even among great devotees. She never wasted time. In her leisure hours she used to read the Gita, *Bhagavata* and other Puranas or sometimes *Chaitanya-Charitamrita* and such other devotional works including those on Sri Ramakrishna. She had such a sharp memory that she learnt many portions of these books, *Chaitanya-Charitamrita* in particular, by heart and could relate the stories

of the Puranas nicely. Sister Nivedita, while writing her *Cradle Tales of Hinduism*, got much help from Jogin Ma's deep and thorough knowledge of the Pauranic literature, and she acknowledged her indebtedness in the introduction to her book.

Even in her old age Jogin Ma felt so much attraction for spiritual practices that in the midst of many engrossing occupations and distractions she would not alter the routine of her daily meditation and Japa. Every day after the bath in the Ganges she used to spend about two hours or perhaps more in meditation etc. Even inclement weather could not stand in the way of her doing that. Those who saw this wondered at her steadfastness. People generally want some relaxation and yield to laziness. But Jogin Ma would not miss a single day. At the time of meditation she would sometimes become so much absorbed that little flies would enter into her eyes, without her being aware of them. "Jogin and Golap have done so much Sadhana. It will do you good to talk about it amongst yourselves," thus did the Holy Mother advise her women devotees.

Even during her last illness when she had not strength enough to get up from her bed, she would ask somebody to make her sit, so that she might go on with her regular spiritual practices or hear the reading of religious literature. But though she had a strong religious turn of mind, she was never indifferent to the daily household duties. After bath and meditation she would go every day to the house of the Holy Mother at the present

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

Udbodhan Lane and attend to the peeling of vegetables and the like. At noon she would go to her own house, cook for herself and for her old mother and again go to the Holy Mother in the afternoon to attend to her comforts, returning to her own house at night after the last service in the shrine.

One of the good traits of Jogin Ma's character was that whenever she visited some holy place she would give something to the poor, disappointing none. She travelled far and wide in India. From Kedarnath and Badrinarayan in the North to Kanyakumari in the South, from Dwarka in Kathiawar to Kamakhya in Assam, she visited many places of pilgrimage.

The foremost disciples of the Master had great regard for Jogin Ma. Swami Vivekananda had great love for Jogin Ma. When perhaps the Swami was coming from the Belur Math to Calcutta he might meet Jogin Ma who had come to the Ganges for her bath. Alighting from the boat almost the first words he uttered would be: "Jogin Ma, I will have my meal to-day at your place. Please prepare that favourite curry of mine." The Swami was so fond of things prepared by Jogin Ma that he would make fun and say: "To-day is my birthday. Entertain me well with nice dishes."

Jogin Ma had devotion to all forms of the Deity. She was never narrow or bigoted. Having that toleration common to Hinduism, she would worship all the forms of the Divinity. While an expert in formal worship, ceremonials

JOGIN MA

and fasts, she had also the highest form of devotion and knowledge in her. That is why Sri Ramakrishna once remarked, "Among women devotees Jogin has the characteristics of a Jnani."

Jogin Ma lived to a good old age. At the time of her death she was seventy-three. As the end was drawing nearer and nearer she lived more and more on spiritual planes. She was quite indifferent to anything that had no spiritual bearing. She passed into life eternal on June 4, 1924, at the Holy Mother's Calcutta home. But the noble memory of her life is a source of strength and inspiration to many devotees—lay as well as monastic. At the time of death she was in apparently unconscious state. But the medical opinion said it was not a state of coma. According to some expert opinion it was a state of Samadhi. In that case the words of Swami Vivekananda with respect to Jogin Ma that one who experiences Samadhi even once in life dies in a state of Samadhi came true.

III

GOLAP MA

It was July 28, 1885. In a dilapidated house in North Calcutta a poor Brahmin widow was making earnest preparation to receive Sri Ramakrishna in her home. She was poor, but belonged to a very high class Brahmin family. Her only daughter had some time back died, and consequently she lived a very sad life.

She was glad beyond measure at the very idea that Sri Ramakrishna had agreed to grace her poor house with his presence. Sri Ramakrishna had already arrived at the house of a neighbouring devotee, so she was expecting him every moment. In her great eagerness she was going out many times just to see whether the Master was yet in sight on his way to her house, and then going in to give a finishing touch to the arrangements of welcome. Her sister was assisting her in the preparations to receive the august visitor.

When the Master came the "grief-stricken Brahmin woman," as she was then called, was beside herself with joy. She did not know how to control her great emotion, and actually burst out: "Well, I cannot contain myself for joy. When my daughter Chandi came from her father-in-law's house and many guards and people accompanied her as a mark of honour to her, and my poor house, was astir with new life, even then I

did not feel so much joy. My condition is just like that of a poor man who got a lac of rupees in a lottery and died immediately on hearing such good news. Really the man died! I am also in that state of mind. Pray bless me, otherwise I shall now die!"

So great was her devotion to the Master that she was rooted to the spot! Her sister was calling her for assistance in the work still remaining to be done, but she paid no heed to her words.

Sri Ramakrishna after returning from her house at night said to a devotee, "Oh, how glad they had become!" The devotee said, "What a strange coincidence! They were just like the two sisters, Mary and Martha, mentioned in the Bible." Sri Ramakrishna felt curious to hear about them, so the devotee narrated the story of Mary and Martha.

This "grief-stricken Brahmin widow" was afterwards known as Golap Ma. Her early name was Golapsundari Devi. She lost her husband while she was of young age. Her only daughter was given in marriage to a very rich aristocratic family. But, as ill luck would have it, this daughter also died prematurely, and Golap Ma was left almost mad with grief. She knew Jogin Ma, her neighbour, who took her to Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar. When she unfolded her sad tale to the Master, he said in an ecstatic mood: "You are fortunate. God Himself helps those who have none else in the world to call their own." The words breathed new life into her, and she felt greatly relieved.

IV

GAURI MA

Gauri Ma's was a striking personality. She was what the Upanishads ask one to be—strong, courageous and full of determination. She passed through very hard experiences of life, but it is doubtful whether she wavered or faltered for a moment at any time. She did not know what it was to fear. Her very presence radiated strength and would infuse courage and hope into drooping spirits. She was all positive, there was nothing negative in her. She had a dynamism rare even amongst men.

The early name of Gauri Ma was Mridani. The date of her birth is not definitely known. It was about 1857. Her father, Parvati Charan Chattopadhyaya, was an orthodox Brahmin belonging to Sibpore near Howrah. Her mother, Giribala Devi, was an erudite and accomplished lady. She composed Bengali songs and wrote Sanskrit hymns which were published in book form. She had also some knowledge of Persian and English. Giribala Devi had a very religious bent of mind and was a person of high spiritual attainments. Bhowanipore, a suburb of Calcutta, was where she usually lived, managing the property of her mother, as the latter had no son. There Mridani also lived with her mother.

Mridani was sent to a girls' school for education.



Gauri-ma

GAURI MA

There she attracted the notice of all because of her remarkable intelligence. But the Christian influence in the school was undermining the faith of the Hindu girls in their own religion. Mridani greatly resented this and as a protest left the school, followed by many other girls. Such great independence of spirit she showed even at an early age. So Mridani could not continue her studies in school; but she had learnt enough Sanskrit to read and understand scriptures like the Gita, the *Chandi*, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and with her sharp memory she could quote extensively from those books. Afterwards she acquired great proficiency in the knowledge of scriptures.

Mridani imbibed from her mother and grandmother a devotional attitude towards life. She would find great interest in discussions on religious topics, and the performance of worship etc. was a source of great joy to her. In a very unexpected way she became a great devotee of Sri Krishna, though her family deity was the Divine Mother. It is said that a woman devotee from Vrindavan came at this time to Bhowanipore and stayed for a period in the family of Mridani. That lady worshipped Sri Krishna. She was so much charmed with the religious spirit of young Mridani, that of her own accord she gave the latter the image of Sri Krishna which she had been worshipping for a long time. This image Gauri Ma worshipped with great love and devotion till the last day of her life.

The elders of the family arranged at this time

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

for the marriage of Mridani. But she was unwilling to marry. She openly said that she would marry only that One who does not die. Her guardians were upset at this strange attitude, but thought she might yet be compelled to marry. So all arrangements for the marriage were made, but Mridani fled from the house on the day of the marriage.

In a day or two Mridani was found and brought back home. But it was difficult for her to adjust her spiritual life to the family atmosphere. The call of renunciation was too strong in her. So she made a second attempt to flee from the house, but it failed. At the third attempt she succeeded in escaping the vigilance of her relations, and this time no trace could be found of her. Spurred on by her spirit of renunciation, Mridani—a young girl in her teens—plunged into the unknown, with only God as her guide and help. When one ponders over the full significance of the step she thus took, one wonders how bold God had made her!

She went to Hardwar after seeing many sacred places on the way. She now began to wear ochre robes, considering herself a Sannyasini. She went up to Kedarnath and Badrinarayan—two important places of pilgrimage in the Himalayas—and then came down to the plains. Her life at this time was full of thrilling experiences. In the beginning she found it difficult to adapt herself to the hardships which she had to face, but gradually she got accustomed to them. Lest her beauty should attract notice, she cut off her hair.

GAURI MA

Sometimes she would smear herself with mud or ashes. Now and then she would dress herself like a monk to hide her identity. For nine or ten years she passed her days in Tapasya and in visiting many sacred places.

While at Puri, Gauri Ma came in contact with Balaram Bose, a great devotee of Sri Ramakrishna. At his instance Gauri Ma visited Dakshineswar. She was charmed with the life and teachings of the Master, and placed herself in his tutelage. After this she began to live at Dakshineswar and in Calcutta. When at Dakshineswar she would stay with the Holy Mother at the Nahabat, and tried to be of utmost service to the Master. The Holy Mother was shy and had not seen the outside world; Gauri Ma was bold and had experience of the world. Gauri Ma, therefore, was a source of great strength to the Mother.

Gauri Ma looked upon the Master as Sri Chaitanya reborn. One day, while in the presence of the Master, she had the experience of divine ecstasy similar to that experienced by the followers of Sri Chaitanya under the spiritual influence of the latter.

At the time of the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, Gauri Ma was in Vrindavan engaged in hard spiritual practices. When the sad news reached her, she got a rude shock, especially as the Master had inquired about her during his last days. Gauri Ma now applied herself to Tapasya more intensely. After two or three years she went again to the Himalayas and practised Tapasya in various places. Of all the places of pilgrimage,

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

she preferred those in the Himalayan region, and also Vrindavan, Puri and Navadwip.

The energy which Gauri Ma devoted in her early days to fulfilling the desire for personal salvation was applied in her later days to the welfare of the many. The last forty years or so of her life were devoted to the cause of women in Bengal. With her wide experience of travel, intense Sadhana and deep culture, she was eminently fitted for the task. Once Sri Ramakrishna gave her a hint that she would have to work for the cause of women. But she was not willing at that time to give up her love for Tapasya and stay in the noise and bustle of a city. Fate, however, forced her.

Gauri Ma, in the course of her wanderings throughout the country, saw the deplorable condition of women. Slowly a desire arose in her mind to do something for them. So in the nineties of the last century she started an Ashrama at Barrackpore near Calcutta to provide shelter for some helpless girls and women, with arrangements for their secular and spiritual training. From this small beginning has grown the present Sri Saradeshwari Ashrama and School, situated in North Calcutta—which is one of the most important institutions in the city for the education of Hindu women. To develop this institution Gauri Ma had to undergo strenuous labour. She had to go about collecting funds, do household duties and look after the training of the inmates. She visited many parts of Bengal, Bihar and Assam to preach her ideas about female education as well

as to enlist sympathy for her institution. The present Saradeshwari Ashrama is a monument of her Herculean labour, steadfast perseverance and great organising ability. She built it up literally out of nothing—with no funds, no resources, no public sympathy when it was started. Gradually when people began to feel the influence of her personality, help started to come in. But Gauri Ma depended not so much on outside help as on the strength of her cause and the blessings of the Master. She saw the miserable failure of the modern educational system, especially of that for women, and wanted to evolve in her Ashrama a form of education best suited to our girls. She was very particular that while acquiring English education the girls should not lose the Indian background. The Institution is at present run by a band of women who received training under Gauri Ma and dedicated their lives to this cause.

Hundreds of persons—men and women—came under the spiritual influence of Gauri Ma. Wherever she would go, there would be great enthusiasm to see and hear her. From her words people would get new hopes and aspirations.

After a life of strenuous Sadhana and harder labour in the service of others she passed away on February 28, 1938, at the advanced age of more than eighty. But she has left behind an example which will not let people forget her.

APPENDIX

THE HOLY MOTHER

Saradamani Devi—the nun-wife of Sri Ramakrishna and familiarly known as the Holy Mother—was born in 1853 at a village called Jayrambati not very far from Kamarpukur, the birth-place of Sri Ramakrishna. Though Sri Ramakrishna lived constantly on a high spiritual plane, almost oblivious of his surroundings, he consented to his marriage. It was, however, out of the question for him to live a married life: his mind always soaring high, any worldly thought was excruciating pain to him. Pure as purity itself Saradamani also had no desire for a life of worldliness. She sympathised with the aspirations of her husband and became a help to him in his spiritual pursuits. All that she wanted was to have the privilege of serving him. That favour she was given in abundance. Sri Ramakrishna, for his part, was extremely considerate to Saradamani. He gave her the best spiritual training and once clearly hinted that his mantle would fall on her and that she would have to fulfil a spiritual mission. He looked upon her as the veritable manifestation of the Divine Mother, and once actually worshipped her as such.

During the last few years of the life of Sri Ramakrishna, Saradamani often lived at Dakshineswar and later at Shyampukur and Cossipore where Sri Ramakrishna was removed during his illness. During these years, although she hardly came out of her room or could be seen, her sweetness of character, loving heart and saintliness commanded such respect from the disciples and devotees of Sri Ramakrishna, that they all began to look upon her as their mother.

DISCIPLES OF RAMAKRISHNA

After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, she passed through a period of great suffering and hardship. But as her spiritual personality unfolded itself more and more, people began to flock to her in larger numbers for spiritual refuge and shelter. She transformed many lives and brought solace and comfort to hundreds of weary souls. It was a rare privilege to come under her spiritual influence, and people thought it a blessed opportunity to serve her in however slight a measure. But she would hardly take any service from anybody; on the contrary she would, just like a mother, look after the comforts of all who came in contact with her. During the later days she lived partly in Calcutta and partly at her parental home at Jayrambati. In spite of the fact that she belonged to a high spiritual plane, she could and would do all the household work just like an ordinary woman of the village. This simplicity of her life gave opportunities to many to mix with her without any awe or fear. But when one got even a faint glimpse of her real spiritual stature, one was overwhelmed.

In the Ramakrishna Order her place is next, if not equal, to that of the Master himself. Swami Vivekananda started for the West on his historic mission only when she gave her permission and blessings. Her word was final in all the important affairs of the Order, and her slightest wish was more than a sacred injunction to every individual. She was virtually the spiritual guide of the Mission as long as she was in her earthly existence. She passed away in 1920.

GLOSSARY

- Aratrika: evening service in a temple.
Bhajana: devotional music.
Bhakta: devotee.
Bhakti: devotion.
Bhiksha: alms given to monks.
Brahmacharya: celibacy.
Brahman: Absolute Reality.
Chaddar: a sheet of cloth used for covering the upper part of the body.
chapati: flattened bread.
Dewan: prime minister.
Dharma: religion.
Ekadashi: the eleventh day of the moon.
Gerua: the ochre cloth of a Hindu monk.
Guru: preceptor.
Gurubhai: brother-disciple.
hookah: a kind of smoking pipe.
Ishwarakoti: those who are perfect from their very birth.
Japa: the repetition of the name of God.
Japaka: one who repeats the name of God.
Jivanmukta: a soul which has attained liberation while still in the human body.
Jnani: one who has attained Knowledge.
Kala: a small part.
Kalpataru: a mythical tree which fulfils the desires of devotees.
Kshatriya: warrior caste.
Kirtan: congregational music.
Kundalini: spiritual energy which according to Yoga philosophy lies dormant at the base of the spinal column.

GLOSSARY

- Madhukari Bhiksha:** the act of begging alms by a monk from different houses without having to tax one single individual.
- Mahasamadhi:** ref. to the passing away of a religious man.
- Mantra:** a verse of Sanskrit scriptures ; Sacred Word.
- Math:** monastery.
- Maya:** the Power that causes the illusion of the world and hides the Reality.
- Mohunt:** the head of a monastery.
- Nahabat:** ref. to a small building at the temple-garden of Dakshineswar.
- Nityasiddha:** see Ishwarakoti.
- Panchavati:** lit. the cluster of five holy trees. Ref. to a spot at Dakshineswar having such a cluster.
- Pandit:** a Sanskrit teacher.
- Paramahansa:** a saint of the highest order.
- Pir:** a Mohammedan saint.
- Prana:** the vital airs.
- Puja:** worship.
- Purusha:** ref. to the Self.
- Sachchidananda:** Absolute Existence, Knowledge and Bliss.
- Sadhaka:** a spiritual aspirant.
- Sadhana:** spiritual practice.
- Sadhu:** monk.
- Samadhi:** superconscious state.
- Samaj:** ref. to the Brahmo Samaj.
- Samgha:** organisation.
- Samskara:** the tendency of past lives.
- Sannyasa:** monastic life.
- Sannyasini:** nun.
- Sari:** a kind of cloth worn by Indian women.
- Sattvika:** conducive to self-purification.
- Shloka:** a Sanskrit verse.
- Sittar:** a kind of musical instrument.

GLOSSARY

Seva: service to the poor and destitute as a form of worship.

Tantra: the scriptures on Mother worship.

Tantrikism: the practice of Mother worship.

Tapasya: spiritual practice with austerity.

Tol: Sanskrit school.

Upasana: prayer.

Vairagya: dispassion for the world.

Viraja Homa: a form of ritual performed when one embraces the monastic life.

Yuvaraja: prince.

